

The Idol Who Forgot How to Sing

Prologue

That Girl, One Month Later

That girl had been the center of attention ever since the entrance ceremony.

That spring, for the young first-year students who had just overcome their trials and successfully enrolled in Houjou University's Department of Public Policy, she was a presence in their classrooms that exuded beauty, charm, and an aura befitting an idol; qualities that gave the students hope for their new university life.

For those that only knew her from legend—her new upperclassmen—she became the object of lively gossip as they'd follow her with their gazes while pointing their fingers at her whenever they saw her on campus, happy to have just crossed her path.

And for her former classmates? While being able to take lessons with her in the same building once again was a stroke of luck, they still had some reservations toward her after she approached everyone with that familiar smile and idol-like demeanor, almost as if she had regressed to herself from a year earlier.

After all, wasn't she supposed to be dating *him*...?

That girl was Ogiso Setsuna.

Titleholder of Miss Houjou High for three consecutive years and in the eyes of hundreds, a legendary songstress.

Chapter 1

That Song, One Year Later

"I-I'm sorry, I'm actually in a hurry..."

"Don't be like that. Just think about it, alright, Ogiso-chan?"

The very moment the fourth lecture had ended, the seminar room bustled with noise as its students were finally relieved of their obligations for the day.

Amid the atmosphere of relief, Setsuna attempted to push her way through the crowd and hurriedly leave the seminar room, but she was halted in her tracks by a male classmate.

"But there's only a week left until the Houjou University festival..."

"You'll only need to sing one song! You'll manage by practicing just two or three times, right?"

"I don't think I can be fully prepared for that within such a short time frame."

She responded the same way she would to any persistent man with an invitation that came her way—by tilting her head to the side with a rather troubled look, though she also wore a brilliant smile on her face.

In truth, she was panicking over the sight of a certain someone's back as he departed the room in a hurry, though her expression did not give it away.

"It'll be alright, you can just pick a song you want to sing and we'll work with that."

"Oh no, I think I'll only end up inconveniencing you that way, so I'm really sorry..."

She smiled gently once more and lightly shook her hands, indicating that she was humbly declining the request she was given.

It had been nearly half a year since she enrolled into university, but that particular expression of Setsuna never collapsed even once.

The fact that Setsuna was still getting many men approaching her under the guise of a variety of reasons—and regardless of time and place—was ample evidence of that. However, it was also proof that Setsuna had not revealed her true self within the half a year she had spent in university.

"Come on, why don't you go with White Album, the song that you sang during the school festival last year?"

But the very moment she was given that proposition...

Setsuna's voice cracked, as if a rift had formed upon her usually reserved and gentle demeanor.

"Or you could go with Sound of Destiny. We'll pick up either of those songs in no time."

"....."

"The truth is, I saw you perform live. I abandoned my own stall and walked all the way to the high school to see that performance."

"I-Is that so...?"

The crack in her voice was gradually spreading to her vague smile, but the man before her did not notice any of that, for he was too engrossed in his attempt to persuade her.

"...Well, personally, though, I want you to sing *that* particular song..."

"That song... you mean..."

"You know, that last song you sang during the festival, the one that was an original..."

"That's..."

Which is why at that moment, he remained oblivious even as the mask she was wearing split into two...

"Alright, that's enough."

"Wha..."

"Ah..."

"It's not going to look good for you if you're going to act all familiar with a girl you don't even know, Senpai."

"I-I don't want to hear that from *you* of all people, Iizuka!"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. I'm having the same thing on my mind right now."

"...I don't want to hear that from *you* of all people, Iio."

However, a certain pair who was very familiar with her suddenly intervened, such that the man never noticed the complete change that had come over her.

"Takeya-kun, Iio, let me apologize to the both of you again."

A few minutes later, Setsuna and her two friends shared a table in a sidewalk café a stone's throw away from the Public Policy Department, and the first thing she did was thank them for stopping that guy—and more importantly, herself—from doing anything rash.

"I see you're as popular as always. Not that I envy you, though. It must be quite a drag..."

In her usual way, Mizusawa Io glossed over Setsuna's apology as she took a sip of her iced coffee.

Her personality had not changed at all since their high school days—she was blunt and open in a way that put most guys to shame, traits that complemented her short hair and vigorous appearance.

"This is the fifth one you've gotten, huh? Almost half the bands participating have come to you with offers by now."

As he added milk to his black tea, Iizuka Takeya expressed his amazement and admiration at Ogiso Setsuna's still-enduring legend, wearing a much more natural expression than when he was with other girls.

His usual poor reputation had only become more prominent since their high school days—it was further complemented by his flashy appearance, with unruly light brown hair and a slender build that put most girls to shame.

"...Seriously, what's even going on?"

To Setsuna, whose popularity was equal across guys and girls and students of different academic years, the two were among a group of four that made up Setsuna's smallest and most important social circle.

"Your traits that made you the winner of Miss Houjou High for three years haven't declined at all. Of course, the same goes for how you are on the inside."

"You could easily win Miss Houjou even here and in your first year, no less... provided you're willing to enter, that is."

"Me? I just can't..."

"That was pretty vain, Setsuna."

"Eh? Ah, umm... What I mean is to say that I don't have any intention to enter anyway, so it's impossible..."

"Yeah, I can accept that response."

"You don't have to tease her, Io. I imagine Setsuna-chan's show of modesty is out of consideration for the other girls, even if it comes off as mean-spirited. I'm sure that Setsuna-chan is at least partly genuine in her concern."

"U-Um... I think you're teasing me a decent bit yourself, Takeya-kun..."

There was nothing that Setsuna could do about the two of them teasing her, for the fact of the matter was that her popularity had not diminished whatsoever.

Ever since she enrolled into university, she had received a continuous stream of invitations from the various clubs that visited the orientation classroom, and within only a few days, her name became well-known among not only the students, but the faculty as well.

That particular uproar had subsided slightly following the end of Golden Week, but she still had to fend off petitions from the committee for the Miss Houjou contest happening in June on a daily basis, who implored her to participate in the preliminary round.

She had a moment's respite after being spared from participating in the preliminaries, but immediately afterward, she became contested by various bands hoping to secure her as their lead singer for the outdoor summer live concert that was to be held on the first day of summer break.

And presently, the battlefield she needed to face had shifted to the university festival concert next week, with many approaching her with last-ditch attempts to get her to sing.

...Moreover, the final round of the Miss Houjou contest finals was also to commence on the same day, though it was deemed an unexciting event owing to "Ogiso Setsuna's decision to abstain from participating."

"Still, it's amazing that you haven't earned the ire of the other girls despite all that, Setsuna-chan. Unlike a certain underclassman of ours did, that is."

"By the way, what about that Taisho Romance Café that the Public Policy Department was planning to put together? It doesn't seem like the maiko have any intention of giving up on pulling two certain people in."

As for why the department had opted for that particular theme for their stall, every single member of the department had recognized the massive scale of her (their) accomplishments—good and bad alike—during the high school festival the previous year.

"Well, she's got such a sturdy defense that she won't even give you room for misunderstandings. Unlike a certain female singer who had each and every one of her fellow members in the palm of her hand, that is."

"Nice. So you're going to turn a blind eye as soon as the subject happens to involve you."

"Don't you think that it was the band members that turned a blind eye, and twice, for that matter?"

"Ahaha, it's kinda nice to see that the two of you haven't changed at all."

Setsuna let out a light smile upon witnessing their exchange, which was more forthright than what would normally be expected between a guy and a girl.

It was a genuinely relieved smile, a stark contrast to the candid expression she wore in the classroom just earlier.

Her social network had expanded since she transitioned from high school to university, but as of now, apart from the two people before her, no one else had ever seen that expression from her.

Yes, not even her own family...

"I'm also the same as always... really, nothing's changed, right? Nothing will ever change..."

"....."

"....."

...And it also meant that they were the only two people who had seen her let out her gloomy, true self.

"W-Well, it seems that he's started another new part-time job."

"...Really?"

"Yeah, as a prep school teacher, for students aiming to go to Houjou University."

That was why Takeya changed the topic somewhat abruptly.

"Wow. I mean, I never would have passed the general exam for this place."

"He always has to raise the bar, even with his jobs..."

"Why does he love work so much? I know he's gotta be spending every spare second preparing for his classes, too."

But Io knew. Takeya wasn't simply changing the subject—it was his way of helping the situation.

"You know how he always leaves right after the lectures end these days? Apparently, he always gets to the classroom before his students do."

"Huh... Yes, that does sound like Haruki-kun."

Because they both knew, even without seeing the relief on Setsuna's face, how starved she had been for conversation concerning *him*.

"How many jobs does he have now? There's also the family restaurant and the convenience store, right?"

"There's the net café, too, so four. Just nonstop from the evening to the middle of the night."

"And he still never skips a lecture or a report, and passes every test... When does he even sleep?"

"See, he's legit just crazy busy, constantly. It's not like he's avoiding you, Setsuna-chan..."

"I know. I know, okay..."

"Setsuna..."

Because they knew that she had been desperately trying to chase after Haruki as he hurried out of the lecture hall just before.

"Have you talked recently?"

"No, not for the past month."

"Have you called him? Texted him? Has he sent you anything?"

"No... I mean, neither of us can."

As they were in the same year in the same department, the two of them could have met face to face and talked every day—there was no need for phone calls or texts.

That said, given that Setsuna couldn't even select Haruki's number on her phone right now, even if she did get the opportunity to sit next to him and start talking to him, she honestly didn't know whether she would be able to figure out how to proceed after that.

"So there's no progress at all, Setsuna. Are you okay with things being the way they are right now?"

"I..."

"Hey, you can't rush her like that. You know that, Io."

What Haruki had done half a year ago...

What he, the supposedly straight-laced class rep, had done then had broken her heart—this girl who looked like an idol, but actually was family-oriented and mischievous.

"Why not just stop, then? Stop chasing after him."

"...!"

"I just said..."

"Haruki's only redeeming quality was his honesty, and he threw that away. What good is he now?"

As his friend, and as her friend... and as the friend of another girl who wasn't here, there was no way, no possible way, that she could forgive that betrayal.

And yet...

"This is my fault."

"Setsuna."

Setsuna would not allow them to blame Haruki.

"I cornered Haruki-kun. I pushed Kazusa too far."

She couldn't allow the one who wasn't here to be treated like she didn't exist.

"I tore the two of them apart."

And she couldn't allow herself to be forgiven.

She lamented the fact that things hadn't changed, but she couldn't allow them to be forgotten.

Setsuna was still wandering in this labyrinth, with no hope of ever breaking out of it.

"Really, though, you two, thank you. For worrying about me while I'm being all indecisive..."

"Well... you're our best friend."

"Right?"

"Sorry..."

Their kindness actually hurt a tiny bit.

Because Setsuna had only ever sworn to be "best friends" with one person.

Up until last year, Io and Takeya had both been set one step below "the three of them."

But they continued to stay with her and willingly accommodated Setsuna and her arrogance.

They were still here with her despite the fact that two had already left her personal circle of three.

"You guys are all I have."

To Setsuna, they were more than just friends.

"W-Well, I guess I'm happy to hear that, but maybe you could try making some more friends you could be honest with?"

"Yeah, having to be your only female friend must be a nightmare. There's no telling when you might get infected by her nastiness."

And the two knew because they were more than just friends to Setsuna.

"What I mean is, your actual personality is great... It's just a waste if you keep faking it."

"Yeah, there's no telling when you might get infected by her habit of talking to someone with a smile on her face while kicking them under the desk."

They knew that Setsuna wasn't happy.

They knew that, in order to support her, they had to surpass themselves.

"If you really opened your heart, Setsuna... you could find more friends you could laugh with, and fight with, for real."

"Oh, yeah, totally. There are loads of girls who want to be friends with you, Setsuna-chan..."

"No. Not when I'm like this."

And...

"How could they, when even I hate myself...?"

"...!"

They knew that, even with all their efforts, they wouldn't be able to bring Setsuna's true smile back to her face.

"What does everybody like so much about me, anyway?"

"I just force a smile all the time. I never go beyond surface-level with anyone."

"I'm a coward and a liar who can't laugh or get angry seriously."

"I'm like a salesperson."

Setsuna had changed.

Half a year ago, at that snowy airport, she had been changed to a tragic degree.

"If I'd known things would turn out like this, I never would have done that concert."

"Setsuna..."

And it had meant nothing but unhappiness...

To Setsuna, and to those in her life.

"I never would have gone up to the roof."

"Hey..."

And yet, as a result of it...

"And I never would have listened to White Album there."

"...!"

She had become chillingly beautiful.

Setsuna had changed.

The sorrowful look that flickered into her face now and then possessed an immense allure that was enough to captivate not only a guy like Takeya, but a woman like Io as well.

These days, she shifted frequently between the idol-like girl and the actress-like woman, toying with others in a way that she herself couldn't control.

If people who didn't know what she was actually like were to come into close contact with her in this state...

This was the real reason that Setsuna drew even more attention now than she had in high school, in spite of her attempts to blend in to be forgotten.

"I'm home..."

"Hey! You're kinda late."

When Setsuna opened the living room door, she was greeted by the now-familiar sounds of her younger brother Takahiro's laid-back voice, and the loud, flashy sound effects of the fighting game he was playing.

Earlier this year, he had managed to slip easily into the Houjou University Affiliated High School with only two months of intense studying; now, as he spent all his time goofing off, that sparkle of effort and talent was nowhere to be seen.

"Did mom and dad go to bed?"

"Mhm, I think they just headed for bed, yeah..."

"I'll take a bath, then..."

"Setsuna?"

"Huh?"

Just as Setsuna had started to let herself relax, the dark kitchen suddenly became bright, and the pajama-clad figures of her parents appeared.

As she had feared before reaching the house, their eyes held a mix of worry, reproach, and relief, and that look was very difficult for her to handle right now...

"You're awfully late."

"Just a bit. I went out drinking with Io and Takeya-kun for the first time in a while."

"Ah, you were with those two. Well, that's..."

The relief in her mother's face was directed not at Setsuna, but behind herself.

It seemed like a gesture that was meant to put someone else at ease, rather than a sign that she was at ease herself...

"Wait, Setsuna."

"Dear..."

But Setsuna's father kept his stern gaze on her, as though her mother's intention had missed its mark.

"I called, didn't I? I said I wouldn't need any dinner."

Under the pressure of that gaze, Setsuna began rattling off her excuses before the questions even came.

It was her way of acknowledging that she had made a mistake...

"What time is it?"

"...Twelve-thirty."

In other words, she was well aware that it was past midnight.

"When you called your mother this evening, you said you would be home by nine, didn't you?"

"I was planning on coming straight home after dinner, but we got really caught up in the conversation... and then we started talking about going to get drinks afterward..."

There was no lie in her excuses.

After lectures were over, they moved from the university café to a family restaurant; then, at Io and Takeya's invitation, they wandered from bar to bar, until they realized that the last trains were about to leave.

"You should have called us when your plans changed. We've all been very worried."

"I... just forgot, that's all."

That excuse wasn't a lie, either.

It was the most fun she'd had in a long time. So much that she'd genuinely forgotten what time it was.

Maybe Io and Takeya had only invited Setsuna along because they saw how depressed she was, and were worried about her.

But she believed that they, too, had truly enjoyed the few hours they'd all just spent together.

...After all, Setsuna had been genuinely enjoying herself.

And she believed that they shared that sentiment too.

"I'll be more careful next time. Okay?"

"Wait, Setsuna. We're not done talking."

"Good night!"

Setsuna had had enough. She was determined to end this conversation.

Partly because she didn't want to deal with the lecture that was inevitably about to unfold, but more than that, she wanted to preserve the pleasant mood she was in.

"You're so insensitive, Dad. Try to sympathize with her a little."

As Setsuna cut off the conversation herself and fled down the hall, her brother began his belated efforts to back her up.

"That thing about all going for drinks together was obviously just a cover. You know the two of them snuck off to act all lovey-dovey in the middle of it."

"Takahiro!?"

But it was support in name only—more like a landmine, catching Setsuna equally in its blast.

"I mean, mentioning Mizusawa-san and Iizuka-san... She's clearly using them to hide Kitahara-san's name."

"Stop it!"

"You're the one hiding crucial information, Nee-chan. What are you so embarrassed about?"

Takahiro, who had not even set down his game controller, was probably less than half-focused on this conversation.

However, the way he was brazenly speculating shook Setsuna so much that she gritted her teeth and she lost her composure in a flash.

"Is that true, Setsuna?"

"I..."

It couldn't possibly be true.

She hadn't so much as talked to Haruki for almost a month now.

"I had thought Kitahara-kun was a bit more upright than that."

"Listen..."

It wasn't true, so she couldn't allow Haruki to be blamed.

Upright? He hadn't so much as laid a finger on her.

He never asked her to spend time alone together...

"I suppose I can't really say, since we haven't seen him lately, but maybe he's changed since starting university."

"~!"

That part was *not* a lie.

He had changed...

Haruki had changed.

"Dragging a young woman around until this late at night..."

"...Told him."

"You what?"

"I told Haruki-kun not to call."

Yes, he had changed... along with Setsuna.

"He wanted to call you because he was worried, but I knew you would object..."

"Setsuna, what does that..."

"Dad! I'm in university now! I can't keep having to ask my parents for permission to stay out late!"

What am I doing?

Seriously, what am I...

"What are you talking about? This is normal."

"No, it's not. I asked the other girls, and none of them have nagging parents like you."

"Well, maybe things are different for them. We are how we are."

"You're contradicting yourself! First you say it's normal, then you start making distinctions! How is this *normal*!?"

There's no point in doing this.

I have no reason to oppose Dad. I have no reason to get this stubborn.

"Setsuna! Stop trying to derail this with petty arguments and..."

"Whatever!"

"What...?"

"We're both adults. We can take responsibility for ourselves!"

I mean, I'm lying.

I wasn't with him. We weren't alone. We couldn't have been.

"So, uh, does that mean you're in an 'adult relationship'?"

At some point, Takahiro had shifted his attention away from his game and was now watching Setsuna, looking vaguely shaken.

"Yes, it does! But what's wrong with that? It's not like we're just messing around, we're both serious about it! There's no reason for you to worry about me, and you have no right to object!"

"...To be totally honest, I'm not sure how I'm supposed to react to that, as your brother..."

Why do they believe this?

It's just an impossible dream that I tossed out there without thinking.

A delusion that I, a disobedient girl, conjured up half a year ago.

Why would they believe it...?

"I was in such a nice mood when I got home, and now you've ruined it... I'm going to take a bath!"

"W-Wait, Setsuna..."

She had reached her limit.

Setsuna hurriedly turned around, maintaining her character as the headstrong, unreasonably angry girl, and took refuge in the bathroom.

"Aa-ah, she's got a lot of guts now..."

The sound of her angry steps storming down the hallway, followed by the slam of the bathroom door, finally pulled the Ogiso household back into reality.

"Y'know, this might just be what happens when you come down on someone that hard for a whole year... It might be time to prepare yourself, Dad."

"For what!?"

"....."

At the look on his father's face, indignant and yet desolate, Takahiro sighed with a strained laugh.

"What's up, Mom? You're spacing out."

"Oh... No, I'm not really..."

And his mother, who had simply been following Setsuna's expressions, wordlessly, this entire time...

"Nothing... Let's just leave it at that."

It was still difficult to gauge the meaning behind the droplets that had seemed to be on the verge of spilling from her eyes, at the last moment.

"...! Aha,ahaha..."

Setsuna blasted herself with a shower that was cold enough to freeze both her body and her heart, and amid the commotion, she finally released the despair that she was feeling.

Her head was full of nothing but self-loathing, running around and around.

Because she had ruined her own good mood.

Because she had become the sort of person who could easily lie to her own family.

And because of the substance of the lie itself.

Because hurting herself was the only way she had of protecting her identity.

"Ahaha... Ahahahaha...!"

Setsuna had returned to her self from a year before.

To "Ogiso-san," always at the center of attention, always alone.

"Liar... I'm a liar!"

No, actually, she was just a little bit different from a year before.

Because the way Setsuna was right now, she was unable to stand being like her old self, and she was hurting, getting worn out, and steadily losing her heart.

One week later...

"What's going on?"

"Apparently, a bunch of impossible mistakes piled up to an impossible degree..."

"...Sounds pretty impossible."

Setsuna woke up that morning to a phone call from Io, who sounded so much like she was at her wits' end that she was completely incapable of getting to the point.

"Our Taisho Café is nowhere near ready, as of this morning, and it's pretty much guaranteed we aren't going to be able to make it in time to open at ten."

"...What time is it?"

"A bit after six."

"How many minutes?"

"Uh... fifteen."

"How many seconds?"

"...Are you actually awake?"

"Fuuuuaah..."

Today was the first day of the Houjou University Festival.

As it was a festival day, which meant a day off from lessons, Setsuna meant to spend this cold morning in her warm bed; but, with her still-groggy head and her suddenly shivering body, she responded in a way that also wasn't particularly comprehensible.

"Anyway, we've mobilized. We're using anyone we can get our hands on. I mean, all of us."

"Uh-huh."

"Obviously, people who have their own clubs to deal with are exempt, but people who aren't here for personal reasons are being called in, depending."

"...Uh-huh."

"People who were just planning on sleeping until noon don't get to argue."

"...Haah."

"Don't sigh like that. You think I want to call you like this?"

"Sorry. Thanks, Io. I don't want to be a hostess, though..."

"Right. Neither of us wants to repeat that nightmare, I know."

The two of them had been the stars of the first and second day of the high school festival the year before, and went through all sorts of ordeals; they knew painfully well what sorts of looks they would have to endure, from what sorts of people, in their period-appropriate outfits.

"We'll be making sweets in the kitchen behind the scenes! I know you're good at that too. The representative came to me and begged me..."

"I guess... Well, okay."

"Thanks, Setsuna! I owe you one!"

Friends of hers from the same department had come to her three times now, courteously asking for help, and she had disappointed them every time; now, determined to clear up that feeling of debt, she agreed, reluctant as she was.

"I'll make myself clear: I *will not* be serving customers, alright?"

"I know, I know!"

"No sneak attacks."

"I swear to God. You won't have to wear any costumes!"

"...Okay. What time should I come in?"

"Well, the food prep team is getting started at 9:30, so we're gonna meet up in front of Building 6 then."

"Got it. See you later."

"I'll be waiting!"

"...Haah."

After the restless, energetic phone call was over, Setsuna once again heaved a sigh of displeasure.

It was partly resentment at the outrage of being suddenly woken up and called in early in the morning on her day off, but even more than that, she was lamenting how suffocating the festival bustle was going to be.

She really didn't want to show up at the university festival at all, not even for one day.

She could already imagine it.

How people would be even more openly over-familiar with her than usual, touched by the bright, noisy, no-holds-barred atmosphere of the festival.

How awkward it would be, running into band and club members on site, whom she had told she was too busy and therefore couldn't participate.

And... all the memories that the school festival—no, the university festival—would recall.

Memories both dreamlike and nightmarish...

"All right..."

In an attempt to cut off those painful memories rushing into her mind, Setsuna glanced at her alarm clock once more.

Then, after confirming that she still had three hours to spare, she sluggishly got out of bed and walked to the door, having decided to first have breakfast.

"....."

She got into thought as she placed her hand against her head, before she suddenly began rummaging around violently in her dresser.

And three more hours later...

"What?"

"Well, all those impossible mistakes were resolved impossibly easily."

"Io!"

When Setsuna met up with Io at 9:30 precisely, Io's voice was quite mellow, reasonably calm, and she still wasn't getting to the point.

As Setsuna digested her words, it seemed clear that the business about being "nowhere near ready" and "not making it in time to open at ten" had been greatly exaggerated, and all they actually needed was one or two people helping out.

And given that the work was such that Io and one other person could handle it, all of the others who had been called in were now going to be happily let off.

"I'm *reeeally* sorry, Setsuna. Anyway, you're all dismissed. Thanks!"

"....."

"...Don't glare at me like that. I apologized!"

It wasn't that Setsuna felt angry about the slip-up born of Io's irresponsible assumptions.

It was just that she simply couldn't believe Io's smooth explanation.

After all...

"Hey! What the hell is going on here, Takeya!?"

"Now, now, don't get mad, Haruki. There's no trouble at all. That's good, right?"

There were only two people, including herself, who had ultimately been called in on account of their misunderstanding.

"That's not the problem and you know it. You tricked..."

"No, I didn't! I didn't trick you! This is just an unfortunate misunderstanding."

"You expect me to believe that?"

From behind her, she heard a familiar voice.

An uncompromising voice, which had no problem arguing with a teacher if it needed to.

A voice that never balked at any favor that was asked, though it never shied away from complaining, either.

A voice that had always expressed its feelings earnestly even if its owner was looking away in embarrassment.

"...!"

That was why Setsuna had been unable to look in that direction this whole time.

"...I'm sorry, Setsuna, really, but this was the only way."

"Eh...?"

Io leaned in right next to Setsuna's ear and whispered to her so the guys wouldn't hear what she was saying.

"I know that today is a double-edged sword for you."

"Io..."

As Io looked straight at her. Setsuna gazed straight back.

To be more precise, she was staring at herself, reflected in Io's eyes.

"But this is a road you have to go down eventually, you know? If you keep running away, you'll never be able to get over it, or go back to how things were."

In her own face, she saw intense anxiety, uneasiness, loneliness, and fear.

"...This is your chance to take that risk, so take it."

"...!"

All that, plus a tiny bit of hope...

"Anyway, you two can do whatever you want now."

"Yeah, exactly. We can go to work, or go home and sleep..."

"Of course, you could also walk around a little since you're already here. The festival only happens once a year."

"Oh, yeah, they're having that outdoor concert today, in the main area."

Takeya and Io slowly backed away from them, retreating into the building.

They were always a perfect duo when it came to shady schemes like this.

...You could barely tell that they, similar to a certain other pair, had their own complicated circumstances, boasting an even longer history than the latter.

"Anyway, we'll leave the rest up to your decision. C'mon, Io."

"Ah, yeah... See you, Setsuna. You too, Haruki."

"Ah..."

"Hang on..."

And that certain other pair, helpless against that extraordinarily in-sync duo, was left alone in front of the building.

"....."

"....."

The four people had become two, and the moment the noise had died down, they realized that this place was not theirs alone, but a public one.

With the general opening time only half an hour away, students were rushing frantically in and out to finish their preparations, and these two, standing frozen so close to the entrance, couldn't help but draw some attention.

"Hey. It's... been a while."

"Y-Yeah, hey..."

"....."

"....."

Even so, for a short while, the guy who always lectured others not to inconvenience people, and the girl who was always trying to bury herself so as not to stand out, attracted the gazes of the people passing by, full of curiosity and somewhat annoyed.

After that, they spent about ten minutes walking slowly around the campus, which was swelling with pre-festival exaltation. It was a complete waste of time for both of them.

"It's... been a little while, huh."

"Yeah..."

As proof, their words to each other were practically identical to what they said ten minutes before.

"....."

That wasn't really the reason why Setsuna wasn't saying anything, however; she was too occupied with trying to look at the side of his face without him picking up on it.

"....."

But there was probably more than that going on from his side of things, too.

As proof, they kept repeating an embarrassing cycle of meeting each other's gazes, hastily looking away, before locking eyes again.

"Are you... doing well, Haruki-kun?"

"Yeah... I mean, I've been okay."

"He" was Kitahara Haruki.

She had met him a little more than a year ago, declared her feelings for him about a year ago, slipped out of sync with him a little more than six months ago, parted ways with him about six months ago...

But he was still a special guy to her.

"I heard you have a bunch of different part-time jobs now. Aren't you working too hard?"

"No, I don't think so... I mean, I'm coming to school every day."

"Oh... Yeah, I guess so."

It was such a bland, standard answer, but Setsuna still savored it thoroughly.

It had been *forever*, after all.

Even though they had been in the same lecture hall every day, listening to the same lectures, they had become so disconnected from each other that this passed for conversation.

"....."

She had wanted to talk to him for so long.

That was why she always tried so frantically to chase after him as he left the lecture hall.

"....."

Even so, the fact that their conversation had now broken off so soon came as no surprise to her.

She had known things would go like this, which is why the moment it seemed like she was about to catch up to him, she always slackened her pace.

"Ah..."

"....."

Those eleven minutes may have been a waste—but the very last moment pushed the two of them to make a decision.

Walking through the familiar campus, following the same route they always walked, they found themselves at the place where it inevitably led.

The main gate, which today was crowded with signs in various colors.

If they took a single step beyond this point, they would return to their ordinary routine.

Their individual after-class routines, where nothing happened, nothing changed.

"Well, um... I guess this is..."

"Wait!"

That day wasn't just an ordinary day after classes had ended, however.

She couldn't let it go the same way yesterday had.

"What do you want to do after this?"

"Oh, uh..."

After all, there was a three-hundred-sixty-four-day gap between "All right, tomorrow's my chance" and "All right, next year's my chance."

"The festival?"

"I guess..."

Having finally lit the fuse, Setsuna followed through on her own momentum and looked Haruki straight in the face.

There, she found anxiety, uneasiness, loneliness, fear...

And she knew that his feelings were exactly identical to those she bore.

She clenched her hands into fists behind her back, having made up her mind.

"Um, well... I know what Takeya-kun and Io said, but..."

"Setsuna..."

"Eh?"

"You really don't have anything else to do?"

What about you, Haruki-kun?

You must be busy with work, right?

You don't have the time to go wandering around some festival.

"...No, I'm free."

She had forgotten now how to lean on Haruki, in the way that she'd done so naturally a year ago.

However, she knew how to handle herself.

"Is... that so?"

"Yep, that's right."

All she had to do was find a reasonable excuse.

Particularly, it was a surefire way to elicit an immediate response from the certain someone she felt such affection for.

"Then, um..."

"Yes...?"

"The festival?"

"We're here, aren't we?"

See? Just like that.

"Where should we go first, then? I think celebrities tend to show up on the first day."

"I'm starving. I skipped breakfast today."

The simulation had ended long ago—everything was going according to the strategy that had been set up two hours earlier.

"Do you want to get a candy apple or something?"

"I think I'd like some ramen."

She had realized to a certain extent when Io called her.

She had sensed Io's deception and concern for her, albeit vaguely.

She felt certain that Haruki would be brought to the scene.

"At a festival? It's not going to be very good ramen."

"I know that."

So she took her time putting her outfit together.

Not too flashy, nor too plain.

Not likely to draw *too* much attention from anyone else.

"...It was pretty lousy last year, too."

"I guess."

But from him... She wanted him to say she looked cute.

She had put so much fervent thought and effort into picking out her clothes and accessories...

"Any toppings for you, miss? We've got sesame seeds, pickled ginger, and grated garlic!"

"Ah, no... No, thank you."

"C'mon, at least just try the garlic! It takes the flavor to a whole new level!"

"Hey, Asai, quit trying to push garlic on a girl this early in the day."

"Ah. Ahaha..."

They entered the *Wandervogel* Club ramen stand right as it opened, and were hailed by the spirited, resonant voice of the well-built vendor, which would have been more suitable for a far greater number of customers. It wasn't especially comfortable.

However, at the moment, that level of discomfort was actually pleasant for Setsuna.

With other things grabbing their attention, they wouldn't be able to focus solely on each other. It was perfect.

As Haruki had so aptly pointed out, the pork ramen they were served, within three minutes of ordering, was of a quality that could really only belong to university festival ramen stand.

They each took their first bites, and exchanged strained smiles with each other.

However, their sharing in this mistake seemed to relieve some of their mutual tension, and as they ate their ramen in silence, the atmosphere between them was as warm as the steam drifting around them.

"Hey, welcome, welcome! Wan-Gel ramen is open for business!"

"You can have a seat right now, if you like! How about it? All right, see ya!"

The woodsman's bellowing continued to sound out, in complete disregard for the comfort of the customers.

In the midst of the noise, Setsuna took advantage of the fact that no attention would be drawn to her behavior or conversation, and sat by his side, slurping her ramen, sipping the soup, and...

"...What?"

"Oh, uh... Nothing."

She questioned his gaze.

"Come on, just tell me."

Because her feelings were now as warm as her body.

Because she had gained the strength to take one little step further.

"No, I was about to say something, but it might come off rude."

"Oh, you mean... This?"

"Yeah... You're still doing it."

The moment she realized that Haruki's gaze turned away from her ever so slightly, Setsuna's left hand moved impulsively.

And the back of her hair, which that hand was holding, jumped with it.

"You always do that when you're eating ramen."

"Always do what...? Oh, you mean holding my hair back?"

"Yeah, um... You don't hold it back with your hand the entire time, do you?"

"I know it would be easier to tie it back, but that wouldn't look good in my case."

"Really?"

"I mean, I always have my hair tied up in pigtails already. It'd look really weird if I tied it together again."

"I hadn't thought about that..."

"Yep. Of course, if I had straight hair like Touma-san, I'd look cute with a ponytail..."

"You're plenty cute, Setsuna."

"Eh...!?"

"Ah, I mean... The way you put all this effort into fussing over little things like that is so... middle-class. It's cute."

"I can't really tell whether you're complimenting me or insulting me."

"S-Sorry."

"...Not that I really care. I'm happy either way."

"S-Setsuna..."

"Hehe...! Come on, eat your ramen before it gets soggy!"

Back then, he had similarly prefaced his remark by warning that it would be insensitive and rude.

"You can't get rid of a habit like this that easily."

"I see."

Back then, they were also at a school festival ramen stand.

It was the day of their public debut as boyfriend and girlfriend.

"Nothing's gonna change that much in a year..."

"...Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's right."

At Setsuna's slightly pouty scolding, Haruki fell silent again.

But the silence this time was more relaxing, not like the awkward silence of before.

Because she knew that the current Haruki had accepted the current Setsuna.

Because she knew it wasn't that their conversation was failing to connect—it was just that there wasn't any *need* to connect.

So Setsuna had her fill of that easy silence, slowly draining the last drop of her soup... and, immediately thereafter, she started to panic over the excess of salt and calories she had consumed that day.

Haruki showed slight exasperation, and a slight smile, at her reaction.

Setsuna smiled as well, enduring the pain that shot through the back of her nose.

"Here, Haruki-kun. They gave me two for free."

"Takoyaki..."

"Yep! It just smelled so good that I couldn't help myself."

"...Aren't you regretting all the ramen you ate earlier?"

"I am! That's why I'm only having two. You can have the rest."

"Wait, wait...! I had ramen, too, as you might remember."

"But I can't eat any more than this..."

"Then what was the point of getting the freebies?"

"Eh? I mean, it was a good deal, was it not?"

"Something needs to be done about that housewife impulse of yours..."

And the events that happened in the next few hours, up until sunset...

Were not ones that Setsuna could clearly keep in her memory.

"T-The Class E haunted house is seriously scary..."

"Sorry, Setsuna. That's probably my fault."

"Is that so...? So they're being so serious about scaring us because of your instructions too, Haruki-kun?"

"Oh, no, I don't mean it that way..."

"Yep, once a class rep, always a class rep. You may have retired, but you've still got lots of influence."

"No, that's not what I... There's some other reason for them being so belligerent in their attacks..."

"Gaaaaaaah!"

"Kyaaaaah! Haruki-kun, I'm scared!"

"S-Setsuna...!?"

"Groooar! Getting all flirty with Ogiso-san in public, are we!?"

"Gwaaar! And just calling her Setsuna, too! You traitoor!"

"Zombies don't get to bring personal feelings into this! You're all supposed to be dead, remember!?"

She had longed to spend time like this.

She was spending it with the person she'd always wanted to spend time with.

"S-Setsuna... You're really planning on going to the Taisho Café?"

"Well, it's the last day! You haven't gone yet, right? It's our class's booth."

"Hey, on the first day, before everything opened..."

"But Io's gonna be there today. Why don't we stop by and tease her a little?"

"No, I don't think we should..."

"...Oh, wow...! Just look at that line! Even though it's the last day...!"

"See? Wouldn't you feel ridiculous waiting in line for your own class? Let's..."

"Oh, it's fine! We won't get bored if we chat while we wait. Let's go."

"Wait! Think about my safety! I can't get caught in that crowd!"

But Setsuna's memories, awareness, and knowledge that she was right here in this moment blended together with her memories of the past, leaving her on cloud nine.

"Why don't we go to the Public Policy Department's booth? Takeya-kun and Io might be there."

"No, thanks. I'd rather not go there."

"Why?"

"...Setsuna, you're never going to change, are you?"

"What... do you mean by that?"

"Do you ever think about how other people look at you or whether they might misunderstand you...?"

"I'm aware of all that."

"Really?"

"Really. Almost excessively. I'm constantly thinking about how other people see me."

"Then try to think about that right now... Think about what would happen if the two of us were to show up there."

"We'd invite a misunderstanding?"

"Eh?"

"....."

"Setsuna..."

"Never mind."

Past and present, dream and reality, recollection and hope.

All of that information from different places and times seeped into Setsuna and sent her emotions into a state of turmoil.

"The school's going to close soon..."

"Already?"

"Yeah, it's a quarter to seven."

"Right. There's no closing event tonight."

"I mean, it's only the first day."

"And... there's no folk dance."

"...Yeah."

"Right... I see."

"Setsuna..."

"....."

"S-So..."

"Hm?"

"Should I... walk you home?"

"Eh...?"

"I mean... may I walk you home? Please."

"Haruki-kun..."

"Wait, no, I..."

"....."

"Sorry, forget what I just said..."

"Hey..."

"Hm?"

"Why don't we... rest for a bit?"

Before she realized, it had gotten dark out.

Night had fallen.

"Ow!"

"*What's wrong?*"

"*...My foot got stepped on.*"

"*Ah, sorry. I haven't done any folk dancing since elementary school...*"

"*Oh, no, it wasn't you, it was one of the guys.*"

"Eh?"

"*See those guys over there, who aren't dancing? They've actually done it a few times now.*"

"*...Pff!*"

"It's not funny! You know you're the reason for it."

"Ah,ahaha... but..."

"I knew people would get jealous, but this goes way beyond what I expected... You're way too popular, Setsuna."

"But, you promised to take on that burden, didn't you, Haruki-kun?"

"And I will. It's my duty, and my privilege, as... um... your boyfriend."

"....."

"...Could you say something? I completely embarrassed myself saying that..."

"Oh, sorry... I got engrossed in what you said."

"Honestly... You're so easy."

"Hehe... hehehe!"

"Setsuna..."

"....."

"....."

"Hey..."

"Hm?"

"Why don't we... rest for a bit?"

"Good idea. Should we head for the vending machines?"

"No, under that tree over there."

"Aren't you thirsty?"

"I am."

"Then..."

"But it isn't my throat that's dry..."

"Eh?"

"It's my lips."

"...Ah."

"That tree is perfect..."

"Setsuna..."

"We have to go under that tree."

"...All right, all right."

In Music Room 2, and under the tree in the schoolyard...

That night at the festival, when the two of them confirmed their feelings for each other.

"So how was the first day of the Houjou Festival, everyone?"

"According to the executive committee's report, our first-day general entrance count topped last year's by about five hundred, which is easily a record high..."

In the empty classroom, its lights already turned off, the only sounds to be heard were the bustle from outside—not as great as it was during the day—and, from somewhere, voices on a radio.

"Incidentally, our own staff were busy recording the outdoor shows."

"I wish I could've seen it! The Watos Troupe's summer performance! Can someone give us their impression at least?"

"...Anyway, there's no point in grumbling here, so let's hear the results of an entire day spent with nothing for fuel but convenience store onigiri... Whoops, I'm grumbling again! Anyway, our first song..."

It was the live broadcast from Houjou FM, which was the only broadcasting station in the university.

These days, it was simple enough to transmit to the whole world through the internet; but this station, sponsored by a somewhat old-fashioned group that was bent on having the broadcasts be limited to within the campus, actually drew a fair bit of popularity among the students, with its sense of exclusivity and its equally old-fashioned, straightforward programming.

"Aren't you cold, Setsuna?"

"No, I'm fine."

Amid the sound of enthusiastic shouts and cheers from the radio, the two of them stood perfectly still, staring at the scenery outside which was different from what one could usually see.

A late autumn wind blew in through the open window, chilled by the dim night.

"That was fun."

Setsuna murmured from the heart, holding her hair back as the cold wind fluttered it.

A murmur full of happiness—whether with regard to now or to a year before was unclear, but it was a happiness she had not expressed recently.

"Yeah... it was."

And Haruki's reply carried a weight that was enough to satisfy Setsuna's overflowing emotions.

It may not have been the reaction he would have given a year ago, but the intention behind it was undoubtedly optimistic.

"We ate ramen, takoyaki, candy apples, crepes..."

"My stomach still feels heavy."

"I'd never visited the manga club before, so that was neat. Though I wasn't *quite* sold on the portraits they were drawing."

"I thought their super-deformed style was pretty good."

"The flea market was great, too. I had so much trouble deciding what to buy!"

"You just haggled and haggled and haggled..."

"Though I *didn't* get to visit the Taisho Café, because a certain someone didn't want to go, but..."

"Will you please just imagine what a disaster it would have been?"

"But, but even so... I really, really enjoyed myself!"

"Yeah... me too."

"...!"

Unable to contain her surging emotions, she took in a big breath, turned her gaze from the outside to the inside of the classroom...

And swallowed that breath hard.

Not because her expectation was betrayed, but because it was fulfilled...

"I enjoyed it, Setsuna."

"Haruki-kun..."

I shouldn't, I shouldn't, I shouldn't...!

Furious alarm bells went off inside Setsuna's heart.

At some point, her eyes had become accustomed to the dark.

She remembered why she had been looking outside until now.

...As a result, the look on Haruki's face at that moment was burned into her eyes.

"Thank you so much for today..."

He was wearing a bashful, happy look.

It was a look she hadn't seen for the past half a year.

...A look she had seen constantly, until the end of that winter.

"I... I..."

She shouldn't do it.

She was on the verge of deviating from mere exaltation.

She was on the verge of becoming someone that troubled Haruki and made him suffer.

"I haven't enjoyed myself this much since I started university!"

"Eh...?"

She shouldn't...

And yet, Setsuna couldn't keep a sob from finding its way into her voice.

"I had so much fun... I was so happy today...!"

"Setsuna..."

The exact situation she had feared occurred immediately.

"Why...? Why...?"

The look that appeared on Haruki's face was unbearable, full of guilt, regret, and sorrow.

"Why are you talking like that again...?"

It was probably changing to the same expression she had.

"This couldn't have been that big a deal for you, Setsuna..."

"But you said it was fun, Haruki-kun! You thanked me!"

"I'm not talking about me, I'm talking about you!"

The results had surpassed her expectations.

They'd talked so much. They walked together. They laughed together.

She genuinely hadn't imagined that things would go this well.

Today should have been more than enough to satisfy her, even if they were to part now.

"Don't you know that there's nothing to be gained from being so obsessed with me...?"

"That's something I should decide, don't you think? You shouldn't decide that on your own."

But she couldn't hold back her greed, seeking something more when things were already going so well.

"Everyone in our department and even those outside our department—guys and girls alike—they're all interested in you, Setsuna. They want to get to know you."

"So?"

"So... if you just look around you, even if only a little, someone else will immediately..."

"I just can't do that."

"But why...?"

"Because I... Because I'm selfish! Because I really am a woman with high standards!"

"That's not true... You're not really the way you look at all. You're ordinary, family-oriented, and sure, you can be a little mean, but... you're really kind deep down. Anyone would fall for you..."

"I'm... I'm only like that with the guy I love...!"

"Setsuna..."

She could only keep pressing forward.

"Yes, like you said, a lot of people have come up and talked to me. They invited me to do stuff."

She had no plan or strategy—all she could do was leave things up to chance.

"I was asked to join clubs, to enter the Miss Houjou contest, to sing at concerts... It was disgusting. They wouldn't leave me alone."

"I came after you to join the contest, too... I was pretty disgustingly persistent about it."

"But none of them cared about my own circumstances! They had no concern for me! They didn't try to get to my core!"

"...!"

"There's only ever been one person who pushed his way into my life with no ulterior motives whatsoever..."

So she felt no more shame over her real self.

"I'm the girl they call '*that* Ogiso Setsuna'!"

She felt no shame over being a princess who was held in such high esteem.

"I'm a fake idol that everyone's put up on a pedestal!"

A troublesome princess, who was not unattainable because of her qualities and worth, but because of how difficult it was to get to know her true self.

"I can't go along with invitations from people who are after something! I can't be swayed by nosiness from people with a reason behind it!"

What this princess wanted wasn't a kiss from a prince.

What she truly wanted was a scolding from her minister.

She wanted someone who was strict and nagging.

She wanted a lecture with sincerity behind it.

"Haruki-kun..."

"We can't do this, Setsuna..."

Setsuna's left hand grasped Haruki's right.

"Don't you remember how much I hurt you?"

His fingers entwined with hers one by one as she wrapped them all up in her soft palm.

"I've abandoned you for half a year."

"You can make up for it... over the next half a year and beyond."

And now, they intertwined...

Setsuna's right hand and Haruki's left hand...

"Even if we did yield to our loneliness and went back to how we were, I could end up hurting you again."

"We won't know that unless we try."

There, in the darkness...

Setsuna's hot breaths, and her eyes, sparkling in the faint bit of light, were all that reached Haruki.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness."

"That's up to me to decide!"

And Setsuna made up her mind to take one more step.

She brought their connected hands to her chest.

She bumped her forehead against Haruki's chest.

"Because I... I...!"

I love you... I still love you, and I always have, Haruki-kun.

Their bodies were touching.

Now, all that remained was for their hearts to reach one another.

"Setsuna..."

"Haruki-kun..."

And it was only a matter of time, surely.

Haruki couldn't leave Setsuna alone, not when they were both on the verge of tears.

He would compare the sin of hurting Setsuna back then with the sin of hurting her now...

And would realize how ridiculous it would be to add a new sin on top of it.

"Setsuna, I-I... I...!"

"Haruki-ku..."

But...

"...Eh?"

"Why...!?"

The romance between the noble and her servant...

The design of destiny, twisted in so many complicated ways...

Couldn't be broken that easily.

"Now, for our last song of the day... I wonder how many of our listeners will know this one?"

"Actually, this one is from last year's concert, not today's."

"From the high school concert, no less... An original song performed by a few underclassmen a couple years below us."

"Yeah, that concert is the stuff of legend. People still talk about how it drew everyone away from the university festival, and there were people just spilling out of the gym..."

"It just so happens that the track found its way into our hands the other day, so without further ado, we give you its revival, one year later."

"Here is Todokanai Koi, performed by Houjou High School's Light Music Club."

"A-Ah...!"

"Setsuna...?"

Everything was rewinding.

"Ah... ah... ah...!"

"...!"

Her body stiffened as she embraced him, her hands weakened as she held his...

And what was left was the true Setsuna, whom no one had ever seen.

The true, changed Setsuna, unknown even by Haruki, with despair painted across her face.

She had almost made it.

She should have been able to follow through on the emotions that she had been keeping in for so long.

And yet...

Todokanai Koi resounded through the dark, silent classroom.

But Setsuna's ears didn't catch her own singing voice.

She didn't hear Haruki's guitar playing.

She only heard the keyboard that gently wrapped up their melody, guiding them...

She only heard the name "Kazusa Touma"...

The wounds carved into Setsuna's heart throbbed.

Chapter 2

The Snow, Two Years Later

"Now, this looks like a proper place to go skiing, right?"

"Hey, why don't we splurge a little and consider going diving in Okinawa or something?"

"You can't swim in Okinawa until April at least. It won't work for spring break."

"Then how about Guam, or Saipan, or..."

"...Remember what the upperclassmen said about our budget limit?"

"Man, this is hard. As soon as one option seems to make sense, it turns out it won't work for some other reason..."

"Well, like I said, if we go skiing, we'll fall within the budget just fine."

"Hey, Setsuna-chan, where do *you* wanna go?"

"Eh? What?"

"We're deciding on the destination for our seminar trip... That's the only reason we got together today, remember?"

"Oh, sorry... Um... Let me think about it for a second."

At the furthest-back table in the Building 6 café—the usual table for the Public Policy students—there was what might be called a "youthful noise" echoing out.

"We aren't even in the seminar yet, though. Why have we been put in charge of organizing this?"

"I heard it was because the upperclassmen are busy with their second-term exams..."

"We're on the same schedule as they are, though."

It was dark enough outside that it seemed like snow could start falling any minute. Despite how cloudy, bleak, and cold the weather was, their lively conversation was full of a brightness suggesting that winter was long since over, and spring break had arrived.

"The second-year students didn't even participate until last year, did they?"

"I think we pretty much have to this year, though. The upperclassmen have been in a big uproar ever since it was decided which seminar we would be participating in."

"...So *that's* what this is about."

"What they're really after is... Yeah, of course it is."

"....."

"....."

In a single instant, their voices froze, cutting off the flow of the conversation, and the gazes of all but one person were fixed on that last person.

"Eh? What? Oh, um... Maybe, like... a hot spring?"

"....."

"....."

"M-Maybe that sounds a little too old-fashioned...?"

"....."

"....."

"Eh? W-What...?"

And when she, fated always to draw everyone's attention, reacted in an uncharacteristically hysterical way...

"Ugh, fine, fine, you win."

"What the hell was that perfect time lag? You did that on purpose, didn't you? You totally did that on purpose."

"God, Setsuna-chan is just devastatingly cute! I know she's sitting right here and she turned me down ages ago, but I just gotta say it!"

"Hang on, you can't just toss something like that out!"

"It's fine, Setsuna. You don't have to be all modest, you just have to be here."

"Yeah, that's enough to change how the upperclassmen and professors act, even to us."

Just as the evening atmosphere at the sidewalk café had finally become tranquil again, the grating noise had suddenly returned in its entirety.

"...Sorry."

But none of them knew.

None of them knew that Setsuna's spectacular blunder was not the result of her natural airheaded charm, nor a mean, premeditated scheme she had set.

None of them knew that she had just been focusing so hard that she couldn't hear anything.

Just for as long as Todokanai Koi played from the café speakers...

Setsuna had enrolled at Houjou University almost two years ago...

And a little more than a year had passed since that signature song, a hidden gem to hundreds of people, had transformed into a winter staple for thousands of people.

After Todokanai Koi had played on campus for the first time, that festival night a year and a half ago, it had continued to receive an enormous push from the campus radio station, bringing in more and more support from those who had known the song since high school and those who had just heard it for the first time alike. Its popularity was now at the point that not a single Houjou University student didn't know about it.

However, in accordance with the strong wishes of the band's representatives, and due to the consideration of her high school classmates, the identity of the mystery singer who sang of that heartache was still highly exclusive information.

That said, the level of persistence from those who were privy to said information was unchanged, and there seemed to be no end in sight to the propositions to join bands, nor to the pressure to enter the Miss Houjou contest, or to the love confessions thrown into the mix.

And Setsuna, the crucial element herself, continued simply smiling vaguely at these incessant solicitations, showing absolutely no sign of going along with anything so shallow.

Even so, if *one* thing could be said to have changed about her...

"So that's what each of us will be in charge of. Setsuna, were you listening this time?"

"Yep! I'll be coordinating with the upperclassmen, right? No problem."

It was that she had begun accepting friends outside of the "group of four," in this way.

Concerts, contests, and dates were all off the table.

But she showed up at just enough get-togethers and tea parties to avoid being seen as standoffish, carried out all the duties that were asked of her, and never forgot to make the coordinators and her classmates look good.

Just friendly enough, just courteous enough, never haughty, never coarse—and absolutely never getting emotional.

"An unattainable flower beyond anyone's reach."

She had come to polish that temporary facet of herself once again, which had been her pride since high school.

But even Setsuna herself didn't know whether this was a step forward or a step back.

Because...

"Oh, yeah, Tomochika-kun... What's the final word from Kitahara-kun? Is he in or not?"

"He was still keeping the question on hold as of yesterday... He's a tough one, huh."

As she gathered new information about Haruki for the first time from other people...

As she heard other people apart from herself confirming new information about Haruki...

Setsuna realized what she had lost in the past year in exchange for what she had gained.

"If Kitahara-kun had taken charge from the start, we wouldn't even have to be getting together like this..."

"You can't shove everything on Haruki like that. He's working almost every day over spring break."

On that day, just over a year ago, Setsuna had stopped.

She had wanted to take Haruki's hand, lean into his chest, and for all the loneliness and suffering she had endured up until now, she wanted to make new heights of love and happiness like never before in their place.

But that single song—nothing more than radio waves—had easily nipped off her overflowing feelings and the courage she had mustered up.

"But his duty as a student..."

"Is *studying*. You know his grades. You think he's gonna skimp on that?"

"That's not all, though..."

"Don't give working students like us such a hard time. I was planning on working through the whole break myself, but I talked to Haruki about it, and we decided one of us needed to be part of this..."

Ever since then, the two of them were left not knowing what to do with their capricious situation, where their hearts were distant despite how close they were physically.

But Setsuna, bearing the responsibility for a mistake that no amount of lamenting could ever erase, had come to accept that irresolute distance, almost as if she had given up.

Almost as if her heart had finally and completely worn out...

"...Tomochika, I have to ask: why do you get so worked up defending Kitahara?"

"There's something weird about you two..."

"Yeah, don't you two work at the same place? Or at two of the same places, actually."

"...Are you, like, a *thing* or something?"

"The two of you act similarly and neither of you seem all that interested in girls... Sure seems possible to me."

It was that very winter that Setsuna had expanded her social network to include other friends.

Perhaps it was in an attempt to use something else to bury the loneliness she felt in Haruki's absence from her life.

Perhaps Setsuna's heart had simply and automatically sought out a balance so that she could continue living as herself.

...But that "escape" had thrown her into a vicious cycle, stirring up the guilt she felt toward Haruki more and more.

"Don't be stupid. I'm not sure if you guys know about this, but Kitahara's pretty damn popular outside of school."

"Whoa, really?"

"I mean, just recently there's been this really pushy girl at work going after him..."

"Eh...!?"

"No friggin' way! Mr. Class Rep? *That* guy!?"

Setsuna's gasp at that moment was fortunately drowned out by the shouting that immediately followed.

"We're in university now, you don't have to keep calling him by that nickname anymore... I mean, yeah, it's accurate, but..."

"W-What's the deal, though? I thought Kitahara-kun was dating *her*."

"What the hell, Tomochika-kun!?"

"If you're *that* interested, ask him yourself..."

"Well, I'm not that interested..."

"Yeah, he's smart, and dependable, and makes decent money, and he's not bad-looking, so I guess he wouldn't be a bad investment for the future."

"If he were just a little more aware of how people were looking at him, I think he'd be on the right track."

"What are you talking about? Kitahara's pretty hot stock."

"I dunno, sometimes it kinda feels like he doesn't wanna let anyone get too close."

"Oh, yeah. He's kinda contradictory, with the way he goes out of his way to help you at one moment and treating you coldly at the next."

"...Let's leave it at that. Anyway, I'm not interested in trying to sell my best friend... You know what, I've said too much already. Forget it."

After muttering these last few words, Haruki's self-proclaimed "best friend" kept his mouth firmly shut on the matter.

"Tomochika-kun..."

"Huh? Ogiso? Are you leaving?"

As the solitary male student hurried through the main gate following the breakup of their meeting, a voice reached his ears, somewhat quiet but still clear.

"Something came up at home... Are you heading to work now?"

"Yeah, at Goodies."

The fact that Setsuna had approached a guy of her own accord might have come as a devastating shock to the guys who perceived her as "the idol of Houjou University."

But the one she spoke to simply saw her as a female friend in the same department, and interacted with her in an unaffected, natural way.

"Really? That's pretty close."

"It does mean I end up running into a lot of people I know, which isn't always great."

"Hehe... I'll have to drop by every now and then."

His response—normal, though not what she usually received—was a pleasant thing for Setsuna, but unfortunately, she didn't have the capacity to be aware of that right now.

"Aren't the girls' uniforms pretty cute there?"

"Well, there are definitely guys who come in just to see them, and... guys who come and work there just to see them, too."

"Ahaha! ...You don't happen to be one of them, now, do you, Tomochika-kun?"

She already knew that this guy—Tomochika Hiroki—was on his way to work, and where he was headed. The fact that she spotted him and called out to him wasn't coincidence in the least.

"Give me a break... I just got a referral there."

"A referral?"

"Yeah, apparently *someone* heard that I was struggling a little with living expenses, and took it upon himself to pass that along to the restaurant..."

"Sounds like... a pretty nosy person."

Setsuna knew that his struggle with living expenses was no lie.

Tomochika Hiroki was a student of the same grade as her; he was older than Setsuna, and he had entered through the general entrance exam after taking a gap year.

He had been an excellent student in high school, and had actually passed the exam when he first took it, but unfortunately, his family circumstances had not allowed him to enter the university that year.

Because his mother, who was his only family, had fallen ill in the winter before graduation.

He spent a year nursing his mother and saving up for his matriculation fee, and two years ago, he had finally passed beneath the gates of Houjou University as a scholarship student, in the same year as Setsuna and the others.

...She had heard about this from Takeya, who had recounted the circumstances rather begrudgingly.

Io had teased him, saying, "You really aren't happy about Haruki being taken away by some other guy, huh?" Though the reality was that the closeness of Tomochika's relationship with Haruki this past year was noticeable enough for Setsuna to feel it, too.

"Was it Haru... Kitahara-kun?"

"Wow, good guess."

That's why Setsuna's reason for talking to him at the moment wasn't because she wanted to know about him, despite how hard-working he was.

"Well, you were just talking about how you work at the same place..."

It was to learn more about the "nosy someone" who had stepped into his life and supported him.

"That guy may be a part-timer, but he talks like a manager... I mean, he works as if he actually does hold such a position, though, so no one can really complain."

"E-Eh, really?"

"We leave everything to Haruki. Shift scheduling, training new recruits, everything. Anyone who didn't know him would think he was a candidate for top manager."

"So that's why..."

"Hm?"

"That's why that girl who worked there... asked him out?"

She was doing her utmost to act casual.

But she was also doing her utmost to hide the racing of her heart, and the sweat threatening to come out on her forehead.

"Oh, that... Like I said earlier, I don't really wanna talk about that."

"Oh, shoot, sorry. Did I just make things awkward?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

"I'm sorry, seriously. That was a rude thing to ask, I was just curious..."

"I mean it, don't worry about it."

Feeling shameful and apologetic.

Beating herself up.

"I'm so tactless... Jeez, what's wrong with me?"

"Ogiso..."

...But unable to drop it, Setsuna continued to push the topic.

She had learned this tactic after having experienced it from others countless times.

She knew that it always ticked her off when other people did it, but right now, this was the only thing she could think of.

That was how far she had been driven.

That was how starved she was for information about Haruki...

"...Well, okay."

"Tomochika-kun?"

Then—maybe because he felt pity for Setsuna, seeing her act this way, or maybe because he was just tired of it—Tomochika released some of the tension from his shoulders and smiled weakly at her...

"I guess you have a right to ask, anyway."

"Eh...?"

And at the same time, he dropped a hint.

"Now, all of this is gossip that I've heard from the girls at work, but..."

Rather, he immediately cut to the chase, as if he had never meant to give her a mere hint at all.

"She did ask him out—but he turned her down."

"He did...?"

"Pretty harshly, too."

"Eh..."

The look on Setsuna's face at that moment must have been pretty strange.

Bitterness, tension, relief, doubt... all of these elements, shifting from one to the next, mixing together, and yet none of these emotions showed on her face.

"The girl hasn't shown up since... It's turned into a bit of a problem at work."

Haruki had harshly rejected a girl who felt affection for him.

The pained, heavy feeling in her heart intensified as two feelings in her heart were in conflict with one another: there was her desire to not believe that Haruki would ever do such a thing, but there was also a part of her that could almost believe that he would.

Because if Haruki had indeed become a person like that, it was something that was extremely painful and heart-wrenching for the one—the ones—who had made him so.

"...Do you think he's going to be fired?"

"Why?"

"Well, when someone causes a problem at work, that's generally..."

"Nah, he's not gonna get fired. He didn't cause any problems with his actual job, and the attitude there toward workplace romances is pretty negative."

"But..."

"Also, I don't believe that rumor. Now, this is just what I think..."

"Tomochika-kun...?"

But Haruki's new "best friend" laughed off Setsuna's worries.

"Haruki's not like that. Sure, he's nosy, likes to be in control, nags a lot, and he can be a bit of a tyrant sometimes..."

His expression and words reflected his confidence in that inflexible, serious, single-minded person.

"In spite of that, he's good at looking after people, and he was made for leadership. I'm just gonna say it... I don't know anyone as hard-working and legitimately good-natured as he is."

"T-Thank you..."

"Why are you thanking me?"

"Oh, I, um..."

This older university classmate of hers seemed to have taken over the role that she herself used to play, and she stared at him, just slightly dazzled.

"...Oh, yeah, didn't you go to Houjou High School just like Haruki did, Ogiso? Have you two known each other for some time?"

"Oh, um... No, we... We were never even in the same class..."

"...I'm just kidding. Sorry, I shouldn't tease you like that."

"Eh?"

"You two were dating, right?"

"...Ah."

Suddenly, Tomochika's expression looked as though it had been hazed by an old memory.

His smile was a bit embarrassed, apologetic, and troubled.

"Just so you know, I didn't hear about it from him. He always clams up when it comes to you."

He was a guy who had managed to discover her secret, which she had kept hidden even though she didn't want to.

"...I don't know whether that's a good thing or a bad thing for you, but..."

He was an insensitive guy who was actually capable of greater kindness and consideration than a lot of people...

"Hey, Ogiso."

"Eh?"

"You still can't forget about him, can you?"

"...!"

Being asked that question with that smile was painful for her.

Though she knew full well.

She understood that she would be unable to see that smile in a way that wasn't fake—she wouldn't be able to see him genuinely smile again.

"Well, I'm splitting off here..."

"Ah... T-Tomochika-kun..."

"You should stop in at the family restaurant sometime. You never know, Haruki might be happy to see you."

"Ah..."

And closing the conversation in a way that clearly *was* embarrassing, apologetic, and troubled, Tomochika vanished from Setsuna's field of view.

As he grew steadily more distant, all Setsuna could do was watch him in a daze.

"You really... want to touch me?"

"I want to memorize you. The way you feel."

"Then... it's okay if you touch me, you know?"

"...Setsuna..."

"Ah..."

There, in the darkness.

With the lights out, burrowed under the covers, light and sound both cut off.

"Mph... hah..."

But these faint breaths still spilled out, making the still air in the room tremble slightly.

It was after three in the morning.

In the middle of the night, when everyone in the Ogiso household should have been fast asleep...

"Hah, ah, ahh..."

From the eldest daughter of the house, who had been raised with love and care, came a voice that was seductive, carnal—indecent.

The first time was about a year ago.

After that night of the festival, when she and Haruki had conclusively fallen out of each other's lives, and she had gone for days, weeks, without being able to spend time with him, or exchange words with him...

She clung to memories of the past, trying to keep Haruki's form from vanishing entirely.

"Haah, ah, mph..."

In her room, in the bathroom.

With her fingers, with the shower.

That memory, from two years ago...

Haruki's voice, panting, aroused, completely lacking in composure.

The feeling of him massaging her breasts through her clothes, pinching her nipples.

It had hurt, but she'd loved it.

It had felt weird, but also turned her on a bit.

She had instilled his inept caresses and his fervent kisses into her body, so that she would never forget them.

These are Haruki's hands.

These are Haruki's fingers.

These are Haruki's lips.

This is Haruki's tongue.

She murmured this in her mind, despite knowing that she would never be able to trick herself.

"Haaah... ahh!"

After she'd touched herself once, she couldn't stop.

At first, it was every day.

Comforting herself every day, drowning herself in pleasure, regret, and tears.

Then, she had desperately tried to repress it.

Once every three days, once a week, once a month, waiting for the desire to pass...

"Ah, ah, ah... aaaaah..."

But, today...

Having had a brush with Haruki's current status for the first time in ages, she found herself flaring up again.

Her left hand, with which she had been touching herself through her pajamas, was now touching her breast directly.

As if to synchronize with it, her right hand started to slip inside her panties.

Her fingers quickly found a slippery sensation.

...Her body had finally let loose.

"N-No, I can't... No... ahh...!"

Setsuna's fingers no longer obeyed her instructions.

They crept over her whole body on their own, stroking her sides, squeezing her breasts, clawing at her nipples.

Fingering her entrance, pinching the bump there, moving in.

"Haruki-kun...!"

The name of the one she loved spilled out of her mouth.

"Haruki-ku... Ah, aaaaaah!"

The name of the one she couldn't move forward with, and yet couldn't part from, whom she couldn't call her lover, but didn't want to call a stranger, either.

Rationally, she knew that remaining in limbo like this was no good for either of them.

Really, she would have to erupt at some point.

To get everything out and reach a conclusion.

But when she thought about what would happen to her heart if things reached the worst possible outcome, she always hesitated.

So she made plenty of friends—at least, that was what it looked like on the surface.

She kept running in circles in a way that wasn't entirely fair, trying to avoid being crushed by loneliness.

...Buying time in a way that Kazusa hadn't been able to.

This is why I can't win against Kazusa.

I can't sacrifice everything just for his sake.

I can't be indifferent to everything apart from him.

To look only at him, to focus every feeling I have on him...

I can't love him in such an elementary-school way.

I can't love him more deeply than Kazusa.

"Ah, ah, ah..."

That's why he... why Haruki-kun... chose Kazusa...

"Aaaaaaaah!"

At that moment, Setsuna reached her climax.

She knew it was the worst possible timing, but she couldn't keep it from coming.

"Ah, ah... ah... aaah..."

As she spasmed, she let all the tension out of her body.

"Ah... aaaah..."

Her first masturbation in a month had felt so incredible that her head went blank.

She was overcome by listlessness that meant that she should have been able to get some proper sleep for the first time in a long while.

"...Gh..."

But even in the midst of the act...

She couldn't forget everything.

"Ggh, ah... Hweeeeee...!"

So, just as always, as the waves of pleasure receded, Setsuna slowly began to cry.

Taking care not to let any of the sound escape, just as she had with her more carnal sounds before.

"Haaah... n-no... aaaaaah..."

Quietly, sincerely, cursing herself for being so pitiful...

A short while after that, a rumor began spreading among the Public Policy students.

If one listened in on their whispers, it was purely and utterly shallow gossip material—apparently, "The" Ogiso Setsuna, idol of the department and of the university at large, had finally found a particular guy to be with.

But because it was so shallow, the speed of its transmission and the ambiguity of its substance were remarkable...

"They were walking around campus with their arms linked."

"She looked completely in love with him."

"I saw them disappearing into a hotel at the station front."

"The guy didn't really look anything special."

"She was crying, and he looked like he didn't know what to do, like they were talking about breaking up or something."

And when it came to the biggest part of this rumor, which had spread in only a week...

"How fickle can they even be? I mean, this isn't *you* we're talking about."

"Are you seriously incapable of complaining about anything without dragging me in as an example?"

To people like Takeya and Io, who didn't even remotely believe in the accuracy of this information, it was nothing more than a dull appetizer.

At a bar in the station underground, near the university...

These two, who had known each other for eight years and could easily drink the night away together, discussed the matter openly.

...Granted, they also never missed the last train, and never drank coffee at dawn.

"So what's the deal? How do things actually stand?"

"Ninety-nine percent exaggeration and lies."

"But that one percent of truth... Then, the guy must be..."

"Yep, Tomochika."

"Oh, God..."

As a matter of fact, Takeya had witnessed it firsthand.

He had seen it in the lounge, where a line of students who were making preparations for second-term exams had formed in front of the copy machine.

There, at a round table, he saw the two of them, laptops out, carrying on a conversation that did not seem especially flirtatious.

To Takeya, who knew that Setsuna and Tomochika Hiroki belonged to the same seminar, that they were both organizers for the seminar trip, and that they were in fact in charge of the same thing, common sense dictated that it must be nothing more than a simple meeting.

Even so, to the guys who had been perfectly repelled by her guard up to this point, the sheer fact of the "infallible" Ogiso Setsuna being seen in public with a guy might have been a major scandal.

But...

"Setsuna has actually started calling me again lately."

"Oh, that's good to hear. It seemed like she was kind of avoiding it for a little while there."

"Yeah, I guess it's a good thing..."

"You don't sound all that excited. Has she been down?"

"No, she's definitely a lot more cheerful than before. Almost like she's starting to act like her old self again."

"...You think Setsuna-chan and Tomochika really..."

"Nope, Haruki is all she ever talks about. Apparently he got a commendation from the prep school where he works."

"...Huh?"

"The exam pass rates for all his classes are up at the top, even compared to the full-time employees'."

"Uh-huh."

"And he's pretty popular with his students. Setsuna was like, 'Oh, I just know Haruki-kun would be a great teacher!'"

"....."

"She seemed genuinely happy."

"...Hey, so I assume the source of that information is..."

"...Poor Tomochika-kun."

In the eyes of a certain duo who knew the entire truth of the circumstances, this was merely trivial, though a particular group of people could only call it a cruel source of false information.

"W-Well, we're talking about someone who's easily as stiff as Haruki here. It's totally possible that he's just doing it out of kindness, rather than any romantic interest..."

"Maybe, but even so..."

Io looked up at the ceiling with a somber expression, holding the remaining ice from her glass in her mouth.

"I've been thinking lately. Maybe it would be a good thing for Setsuna to find someone else right now."

"...What does that mean?"

Takeya slouched sullenly, as though to match Io's own behavior.

"I think both of them would be happy. They've already gotten this far."

"....."

In fact, his mood genuinely had gotten sour.

"What do you think, Takeya? Are you still not willing to accept the idea that the two of them should break up?"

"It's not up to us to decide."

"But can't we have an opinion as her friends? I'd like to think we have that kind of relationship."

Because, of course, these two had had this discussion before.

And, of course, he remembered the conclusion that they had reached every single time.

...Or rather, the fact that they had never once reached a conclusion.

"And you're saying Tomochika should be her new partner? Haruki Unit-00?"

"He sure would be a lot better than Takeya Unit-01."

"What, because he looks like her last boyfriend? He'd be the perfect substitute for Setsuna-chan?"

Takeya swallowed the counter he'd been about to make for being brought in as an example yet again.

"That's not what I meant. If we just think about it rationally..."

"Sorry, but I can't make that decision rationally, and I don't want to."

"I knew you would say that, but what about Haruki's feelings?"

"I..."

...Naturally, however, that didn't mean he could escape this fruitless discussion.

"Setsuna's not hiding it. She's not making any secret of the fact that she's still crazy over Haruki."

Since they entered university, the frequency with which they met up alone had actually dramatically increased.

"But Haruki... Does he really still have feelings for Setsuna?"

"I... don't know that."

"Really? Not even you?"

But his recollections of actually talking about *themselves* when they saw each other were too few to count.

"He's too fixated on his own guilt over what he did."

"Well, I mean... what he did really was *that bad*."

"He knows that better than anyone."

Always starting without so much as a toast, bogging themselves down in topics with no satisfactory resolution, then finally splitting off with a mutual acknowledgement that even spinning their wheels had its limits.

"So even if he *does* still have feelings for Setsuna-chan, there's no way he's letting that fact slip, and there's no way he'll show it, either."

"Jeez, this is such a pain in the ass..."

"We're no better."

Really, that was all that could be said. They weren't any better.

Not bothered by this utterly barren relationship.

Accepting that they would remain by this person they'd known for so long as a given.

...And, yet again, these two people, who are equally pains in the ass, drank together.

"Exams are finally done..."

"Yeah, they were really rough this time."

It's a Saturday in mid-February, the last day of second-term exams.

Blithely unaware of the rumors that continued to proliferate, the two people concerned sat in the familiar café next to Building 6.

Amid the atmosphere of relief enveloping the whole university, the two of them chattered on with a greater sense of freedom than usual.

"Really? I thought you always got A's."

"Yeah, because I studied my ass off. This time, I had to keep going to work while the exams were going on."

"Eh? Why... Ah."

"If I manage to advance to the next grade, I'll still need the money to afford it..."

"Right..."

Setsuna realized, from his slightly clouded expression and self-deprecating words, that she was the only one who had actually been set free.

She realized that Tomochika's struggle right now was not with the Houjou University Public Policy Department, but with his family's economic situation.

"I guess... I can't sympathize with that, exactly. But I'll pray that you can advance without any problems."

"Ogiso, you..."

"Hm?"

"It's somehow comfortable being around you."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

At this slightly askew praise, so utterly different from what other guys would say, and reminding her vividly of a certain someone, Setsuna forgot to keep her mask on, and stared at him in puzzlement.

"Most people jump straight to sympathy when I talk about stuff like this, which makes the mood get all weird and apologetic, and it gets rather suffocating. It never goes in a good direction."

Immediately after this, Tomochika reflected with utter earnesty, that he was really the one in the wrong for bringing up a topic that no one would enjoy.

"There's nothing special about this."

Now absolutely reminded of a certain someone, the only thing Setsuna did with her expression was let out a light smile.

"The fact that you genuinely think that way is one of the best things about you, Ogiso."

"Well, I know the fact that I can't sympathize with you means I can't butt in, either."

"What do you mean?"

"The only people who can fully sympathize with others are people who will make a serious effort to fix the other person's problems."

"Oh, yeah, I guess so... There are definitely people like that around."

"Yeah, for sure... Hehe."

And she revealed her true feelings without acting pretentious with her words or attitude.

Everyone here would acknowledge the feelings she bore for Haruki, and no one would deny them.

Furthermore, everyone would agree with Haruki's actions. This was the ideal space for Setsuna.

In the past few days, Setsuna had heard about Haruki numerous times from Tomochika.

She learned about the way he worked, acted, and spoke at the workplace they shared.

She learned about how much effort he put in when the two were paired up together at work, about his ability and perspective; she also learned how he would take care of and lecture others as well as act kindly in private.

Haruki's own feelings for Setsuna never came into the discussion, but it was more than enough to soothe Setsuna's loneliness anyway.

On top of that, Tomochika also clearly valued Haruki and couldn't help but feel sympathy.

"Well, spring break starts tomorrow. It's finally time for that trip."

"Looks like we're still going to be pretty busy... All right, let's start today's meeting."

As a result, Setsuna was able to find peace of mind in this alliance.

After all, this was nothing more than a meeting between two organizers for the seminar trip.

They were just gossiping about someone they both were familiar with.

"Though, I think all we have left to do is follow up with the people who haven't told us whether they're attending or not."

"How many are there?"

"We've got twenty-five people who confirmed they're participating, and three who said they aren't, so that leaves sixteen..."

And Setsuna, regardless of the fact that most people would see this as a different sort of relationship, felt no guilt where Tomochika was concerned.

After all, he was different from most male students, he had no ulterior motives or secrets.

Talking on and on about Haruki must be pleasant for him, as well.

Above all, Setsuna held at her very core a theory that would have stunned most people: "Anyone who likes Haruki-kun can't be a bad person."

"Eh? That's not the total I got. Isn't it seventeen?"

"Eh? I don't think..."

"Look, if we include the second-years, there are forty-five people in our seminar, see? And we've gotten responses from twenty-eight of them?"

"Ah..."

"So there are seventeen left. Let me see the roster."

"No, wait, Ogiso..."

As a result, Setsuna completely failed to notice how Tomochika's expression wavered at that moment.

"There's one person missing. Think about how bad they would feel, not even being contacted."

"....."

After all, she had complete confidence.

That they were friends.

That there were no feelings other than friendship.

That, with their relationship as it was, there should be no secrets kept from each other...

"...Huh?"

As Setsuna checked over the list of names on the screen, her eyes stopped.

Not because she had found the line she was looking for, but rather the opposite...

"...He's not here."

"...!"

She found that the roster of seminar students, which should have had forty-five people, ended at line forty-four...

"Haruki-kun's name..."

And the fact that the name of the person Setsuna wanted to confirm first of all had disappeared from the list.

"Oh, yeah... About that..."

"Huh!? About what?"

"W-Well, actually..."

"What? What's going on?"

Her voice cracked.

Her tongue was tied.

She felt her heart constrict itself very uncomfortably.

"Haruki isn't in our seminar."

"W-Why!?"

She could tell from the sensation that she was feeling...

That all the pores in her body were open and she was letting out cold sweat.

"He's... transferring in April. He's going to the Literature Department."

"...Huh?"

In that instant, Setsuna's face froze.

She detached all emotion from her expression.

...If she hadn't, she would have made a face that no one should see.

"You have one new message. 2:32 PM."

"....."

"Setsuna? It's me, Io."

"I just got back from where Haruki works. I talked to him for a second."

"...I'm sorry. We didn't even know until today that he was transferring departments."

"We got into a bit of... No, we got into a decent argument."

"Actually, Takeya was pretty seriously pissed off..."

"It must have been a pretty big shock that Haruki didn't talk to him about this."

"He was still in a bad mood the whole way back... It was a real pain in the ass trying to calm him down."

"Anyway, never mind about us..."

"The point is, we told Haruki to talk to you again."

"He said you told him something like, 'Keep it up, I know you'll do great'?"

"For crying out loud, why do you do this to yourself? Can't you just get mad at him for once?"

"You can't let him off that easily for being that selfish."

"All right? Have a real conversation with him."

"More than one, actually. Have as many real conversations as you need until you're happy with things."

"If you want, Takeya and I will come with you."

"I'll call you back later. Bye for now."

"...Oh, also..."

"Happy twentieth birthday."

"...!"

The moment the answering machine playback ended, Setsuna almost flung her phone away... then stopped at the last moment, and tossed it on the bed.

Perhaps her presence of mind was returning just enough for her to realize that taking it out on the phone, or on Io, would be wrong.

She had spent almost the entire day like this.

Shut away in her room with the door locked, hugging her knees on the floor, giving no answer to the calls of her family, who had put together a party for her...

"...Uu..."

As she pondered over her current circumstances, her stomach suddenly started to hurt.

The last thing she had consumed was a single coffee from the café she had visited on the way home.

Because she had seen *him*, and he had robbed her of all her energy...

After Tomochika told her about Haruki's transfer, she started wandering the campus in search of him.

She knew all she really had to do was call him, but when she thought about the possibility that he might not pick up, she couldn't find the strength to do so.

She thought of how he would be busy, how he could be feeling awkward due to his decision to transfer, how he could have blocked her number because he simply had no desire to talk to her anymore...

As she imagined all these trivial possibilities, her heart was worn down further and further.

After she had finally started to find some emotional balance again, she was afraid of it all going down the drain.

Thirty minutes later, she finally found Haruki.

...He was at the front gate, waiting for her.

He, too, seemed to have prepared himself for this.

But, apparently, he had also lost the courage to call Setsuna on the phone.

After that, she went back to the café, and had a talk with Haruki.

At the same table where she had sat with Tomochika, thirty minutes before.

Her classmates, who had been sitting at the next table over for the past half hour, had dubious looks on their faces, but she didn't have the capacity to care about that right now.

She had gone to all this trouble, and finally found an opportunity to speak to him again, but...

"Y-Yeah. I want to work at a publisher, so..."

Setsuna hadn't been able to convey anything to him—not the questions she needed to ask, not the way she had been feeling, not the extremity of her emotions at that very moment.

"Eh? Oh, no, I think literature is perfect for you. You were always good at writing."

She simply listened as Haruki spoke about his reasons for transferring as if it was the most natural thing in the world, working desperately to maintain a look of composure.

"Wow... So you've already thought that far ahead. There's just no matching you, huh?"

She tried to smile all the while...

"...Will we be able to see each other?"

How could they?

They weren't even seeing each other with the way things are.

"H-Hey... Can I keep calling you?"

How?

She couldn't even call him as it was.

How was she supposed to connect to him, now that they were separated?

"We'll be okay, right?"

Okay how?

"W-What am I even talking about? Aha, ahaha..."

What was she talking about...?

Fragments of what she had said earlier came and went through her head.

But she couldn't remember anymore whether such shallow flattery had actually come out of her mouth.

All she remembered was the strained smile she gave when they parted.

She turned around and left the café while attempting to maintain her expression, knowing that it would crumble completely given a few more seconds.

Why?

Why do things always end up like this...?

She had lost track of how many times she had asked herself this question.

A question with no answer. A labyrinth with no exit.

Why now?

I hate this.

I hate things being this way.

I mean, it's...

My birthday.

February 14th.

To the world, Valentine's Day; to the Ogiso family, Setsuna's birthday.

And this year, it had an even more special significance than that...

"~~~!"

Snow had begun to fall.

As she looked through the window of her freezing-cold room, there it was—the same as this day two years ago, that white emblem of betrayal, falling from the sky...

...No, that was an illusion.

Haruki hadn't come then, either.

He had betrayed Setsuna then, too.

A flake of an afterimage of the past, shown to her by memories that she couldn't erase.

Right now, Setsuna didn't see anything.

With her face buried in the darkness of her knees, she didn't see outside the window, or the clouds, or the snow, or reality, or anything at all...

"Setsuna! Get down here!"

"....."

Her mother's voice, taking on a stern edge, reached her from the bottom of the stairs.

But it was no use.

She didn't want to eat anything.

She didn't want to see her family's faces. She didn't want to talk.

Because if anybody spoke kindly to her now...

She couldn't even imagine how shamefully temperamental she would become, how she would explode, and then break down, and need to be comforted.

"At least show your face! You have a guest!"

"...Eh?"

"We told Haruki to talk to you again."

Those words, ones that were given to her by someone just a short while ago, suddenly popped into her mind.

"Haruki-kun...!"

That's why Setsuna hurriedly stood up...

And she struggled to gain control over her body, which was stiff from having barely moved for the past day.

She desperately tried to force out as much strength as she could, but she could only move clumsily.

Her heart was in a rush, but she could only descend the stairs slowly.

She excitedly opened the front door and went out to open the gate.

"Ogiso..."

"...Eh?"

And beneath the clear, dark winter sky, Setsuna stiffened up again.

A visitor she never could have anticipated stood before her.

"Sorry to show up so late at night."

"Tomochika-kun...? Why?"

"Why? Well, um..."

The way her reaction came out, anyone would have seen it as cold enough to warrant anger.

Normally, he should have been quite predictable as a visitor.

After all, he was the person she had seen the most of lately, even more than her female friends...

"You seemed really upset before... I was wondering how you were doing."

"A-Ah."

Nevertheless, Setsuna couldn't dispel the unease coiling around her body.

Because he didn't satisfy the "rule" for who ought to be here with her right now.

"Sorry, Ogiso..."

"For... what?"

This was the arrogant, selfish way in which Setsuna thought now, what she held in the innermost depths of her heart, now that she had changed in the way she had.

But these thoughts didn't negatively impact her popularity or reputation.

Because Setsuna was an adult.

She never showed those innermost depths of her heart on her face.

...In sharp contrast with a certain someone who, years ago, was just on the brink of being her best friend.

"For not bringing up Haruki's transfer sooner. I just..."

"That's... not your fault, though, Tomochika-kun."

"Still, I want to apologize... I'm sorry."

"Really, it's okay..."

It seriously didn't bother her.

There wouldn't have been any room for him to factor into the decision Haruki had made.

"Anyway... What are you going to do now, Ogiso?"

"What am I... What does that mean?"

She just wanted him to leave her be.

She wanted to be alone.

She didn't have the capacity to care about other people right now.

"I mean, I want to keep going as we are, even though he's transferring."

"As... you are?"

"To stay best friends... that's what I mean."

"...!"

He was radiant as he used that phrase, "best friends," again, and it made her envious, too.

She envied him deeply...

"We'll still see each other at work every day... Well, I guess we won't be able to work together on exam prep anymore since we'll be taking different exams, but..."

As she heard him speak in such an optimistic manner, Setsuna found herself imprisoned by jealousy...

"Anyway, what I mean is, you can keep using me, like you have been."

"...Eh?"

For a moment, she couldn't understand the meaning of the slightly more negative words that followed.

"Oh, no, I don't want you to take that in a bad way or anything..."

"U-Um...?"

"I guess what I'm trying to say is... It makes me really happy that you love Haruki."

"O-Okay...?"

"And I think it's nice that you're actually so attached to him."

Setsuna pinned down part of the weird feeling she was experiencing.

Something different in the way he said, "You" ...

"What drew me to you wasn't your prettiness, or your glamorous aura, or anything... Well, I mean, I like those things about you, too, but..."

"...!?"

Elements of the way other guys talked to her were starting to sneak in.

Sooner or later, he would probably start calling her "Setsuna"...

"The big thing for me was the way you look at the way people actually are, instead of just what they seem like on the surface."

He said it!

He said he was "drawn to me."

He said... "like."

...He tricked me!

Tomochika hadn't made a single mistake.

It was certainly Setusna's own unjustified resentment...

Something due to Setsuna's own *real nature*.

"You realized how good Haruki really is before anyone else."

No, I didn't...

Not before anyone else.

I was the second one.

Tomochika's words slid off the surface of Setsuna's skin, and soaked into the ground.

As they slid, they left a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

"You ignored the guys who approached you, started liking him by your own will and proactively made your own move..."

No, I didn't...

I didn't only do it out of my own will.

I just had to do it myself, because the first person was too strong.

"That's why Haruki fell for you, too, even though it wouldn't seem like the two of you suit one another."

What? What's going on?

Why is he talking about me and Haruki-kun? He doesn't know anything.

He doesn't know about the three of us. Why is he talking about two people?

"So I'd like things to stay the way they are with you."

There were no lies, no traps, no schemes in what Tomochika said.

"You can keep using me as long as you want."

It was a true confession—earnest, sincere, facing his heart toward hers.

"I'm going to be the one friend that you can divulge anything to, without hiding anything about Haruki."

...If he had made *one* error, it was in not knowing that his words and feelings, honest as they were, had no chance of reaching Setsuna in the first place.

Whether they were earnest, or half-hearted.

Whether they were sincere, or superficial.

None of that had any meaning to Setsuna right now.

"Also, um, if..."

Stop.

"If you two can't go back to the way you were..."

Stop.

Stop, stop, stop!

"I can be your replacement for Haruki..."

"Ah..."

He said it.

"Happy birthday, Ogiso..."

"....."

He confessed his feelings for me.

He became vulnerable to me.

"This is for you."

I'm sorry, Haruki-kun.

Two years ago, she had been betrayed.

She had been kept at a distance for a year.

And now, she had been prevented from even being near him...

I'm sorry.

And yet, that traitor was all that filled Setsuna's head.

"I can understand why Haruki-kun would try to run away from you, too."

"He's a good guy, he's serious, he's honest."

"That's why he can't forgive himself for betraying you."

"I do want to support you two."

"But, at the same time, I feel like this can only go so far."

"I really think you should forget about him at this point."

"You know what I mean, don't you?"

"The fact that you can't let Haruki go is making him suffer more."

"Yes, Haruki's suffering. And so are you."

"I just want to know whether I could ease your suffering at all. For both of you."

"...!"

After Tomochika left, Setsuna didn't move from that spot for a while.

In fact, she hadn't moved at all while Tomochika was there.

She hadn't been able to give her standard, forced smile as he confessed to her.

She couldn't do anything... She couldn't refuse him, accept him, smile or cry.

The wrapped gift he had given her sat on the ground in front of her.

She hadn't been able to thank him.

Though it was Valentine's Day, she hadn't been able to give anything back to him.

In fact, she couldn't even take it from him.

She just stared blankly, somewhere that wasn't at him or at the sky.

Tomochika was a bit at a loss at her lack of response when he offered it to her.

...No, he must have been hurt.

"....."

But Setsuna didn't have the capacity to worry about Tomochika.

Her mind was in too much disarray to think about anything.

She was hurt even worse than he was.

She didn't have the self-awareness to grasp her own wrongdoing... She couldn't realize how poorly she had treated him.

And, for one more reason...

"You're here, aren't you...?"

Because she had noticed.

"...Haruki-kun."

As Tomochika was leaving, when he reached the street corner, he looked surprised for a moment...

And Setsuna had spotted the figure of another person, reflected in the curve mirror.

"Setsuna..."

Three deep breaths after Setsuna spoke his name, he finally appeared from around the corner.

Haruki, as she had seen him yesterday.

Haruki, as she had parted from him yesterday.

Haruki, as he had been when he told her about his transfer.

"You... saw that, didn't you?"

"Setsuna... I..."

"Don't."

She knew just from looking at his face...

How much of that conversation he had just heard.

"That's enough..."

Really, for the past year, this was the only look she had seen on his face.

Though he always lectured people to look others in the eye when talking to them, he couldn't bring himself to meet her gaze, always looking forward.

And all she saw there were the same old sentiments—awkwardness, remorse, and guilt.

"Why didn't you come out?"

"I..."

For that matter, Haruki had probably only seen Setsuna's current expression on her face for the past while.

Her impish smile as she looked into Haruki's face with round, up-turned eyes had submerged itself—her expression now was faint, fleeting, something that didn't look like a smile, but looked like she was smiling to herself.

"Were you waiting for Tomochika-kun to finish?"

It hurt.

It was uncomfortable.

She had been seen.

She had been caught at the worst possible moment, by the last person she wanted to witness it.

"I... think he's genuinely worried. About you, and about me."

"Oh... I guess."

She wanted to apologize.

For making one of Haruki's best friends, someone so important to him, feel something unpleasant.

For giving him the wrong idea without being aware of it. For hurting him.

And... though she had sort of been hoping for this...

For making Haruki feel something unpleasant, too.

For maybe, just maybe, making him jealous.

"You and Tomochika-kun... are really close, huh?"

If that were the case, she would have to apologize sincerely.

She would have to cling to him desperately, unleash everything, and shed tears.

"He's... working really hard. A lot harder than I am, really. So..."

"Yeah, he is. I agree. I have a lot of respect for him."

"Setsuna..."

And that would be their chance to excise all the rot from their hearts.

This could be their chance to make up...

"Is that why you gave me to him? You handed me over?"

But it was too late.

The surface of Setsuna's heart had already been scraped off.

"Do you trust him? You know he'll treasure me? He'll keep looking only at me? He'll stay with me forever?"

And with it, the dark, stagnating substance within proceeded to overflow violently.

"The weight is off your shoulders now? You're free to forget about me? You don't have to suffer any more?"

Polluting and covering everything—Haruki, Setsuna, their history, the trio's past.

"That's great... That's wonderful...!"

Though she tried desperately to cover her heart with her hands, it boiled over through the gaps between her fingers.

"Gave you? Handed you over? You belong to yourself, Setsuna. You're not anyone else's."

"You think that's what I want to hear right now!? Something that obvious!?"

"Setsuna..."

"...!"

Haruki finally looked her straight in the eyes.

"I'm sorry..."

But the despair etched into his face was even deeper than when he was looking down.

N-No, this is wrong...

I just wanted to apologize.

"I'm sorry... for everything."

By the time she realized it, it was too late.

Haruki was hurt more than she could have ever imagined, and she found herself hurt even more than she could have ever expected.

She had fallen into the same downward spiral.

"I know how badly I've hurt you..."

No, that's not it. Listen to me.

I'm the one in the wrong!

"But I was never able to do anything..."

I'm sorry for the pain I caused you.

I'm sorry for showing weakness around you.

"I couldn't take a step forward or take a step back..."

You're all I have, and I still... I'm sorry...!

"Let me just say it again."

So get mad at me.

"I'm sorry, Setsuna..."

Snap at me. Yell at me.

...You can even hit me.

"I've done so many things that I know can't be forgiven, but still, I'm sorry."

Create an opportunity.

An opportunity for us to clash again.

"But I..."

If you do that, then this time, I'll...

This time...

"I'll make sure we'll come to a conclusion for this, no matter what happens."

"Ah, haha..."

Snow had begun to fall.

In this place, with nobody but Setsuna.

"Ahaha... ha ha..."

As she looked up into the freezing-cold air...

There it was—the same as this day two years ago, that white emblem of betrayal, falling from the sky...

...This time, it was real.

Haruki hadn't come then.

And now, Haruki has left.

He had betrayed Setsuna then.

And now, he had run away again, leaving her still betrayed.

He had reenacted the inescapable past that they shared once more.

"Ahaha... hahaha... aaaaaah...!"

There wasn't enough strength left in Setsuna's frayed heart to hold that reality back anymore.

This time, I'll forget about him.

If it hurts this bad, I don't want to be anywhere near him.

He thought the same thing about me. That's why he distanced himself.

So I'll just forget it all.

I'll gather everything I hate about him and put him out of my head.

I'll hate him. I'll loathe him.

I've already found the first thing I hate.

I hate that he didn't say anything to me and tried to push me away...

Hey, Haruki-kun, we're finished now.

This is for the best... Goodbye.

Chapter 3

That Sentiment, Three Years Later

It was April.

At long last, it was the third year since Setsuna had entered Houjou University.

The season when Todokanai Koi, the winter staple, had ceased to play on the university radio station...

"Setsuna! You're coming to the welcome party next weekend, right?"

"The grad students said we *have* to bring you this time!"

"Yes, yes, okay, I'll go!"

Even in a new term, in a new year, Setsuna was placed at the center of attention, just like always.

"Don't schedule anything else, got it? You'd better come to fourth period. We're kidnapping you as soon as the lecture is over."

"I'm gonna keep an eye on you the whole day. Don't make any suspicious moves!"

"You've told me that five times now. Don't you trust me at all?"

"Uh, no..."

"Yeah, like, coming from the girl who decided to skip out on the seminar trip last-minute..."

"I-I told you, I had the flu! I told you a million times..."

A month and a half since her twentieth birthday...

Until the new university term started, Setsuna had spent her spring break as what might generously be called a shut-in.

Not because she had actually had the flu, of course—she just didn't attend the planned seminar trip, didn't do anything at all from dawn till dusk, and she avoided seeing anyone the whole time.

"You didn't even get any invitations from Kitahara-san? That sounds like the end, Nee-chan."

"Haruki-kun is basically living at work throughout the whole spring break. He's not like a certain little brother who just stays at home and plays video games all day."

"So he's not like a certain older sister, either... Actually, never mind. There's no way for either of us to win this."

This state of things persisted at home...

In other words, she hadn't even told her family yet that she had broken up with Haruki.

At that moment, Setsuna had found yet another thing she hated about Haruki.

She hated that he had forced her to tell such a pathetic lie.

"We really were in a pickle back then."

"No kidding. *Two* of the organizers dropped out..."

Even now, as she was immersed in these unpleasant recollections, the hassling from her two-person "pressure group" didn't let up.

Although, the leading edge in their tones was one of deep curiosity, rather than resentment...

"Setsuna, I'm really sorry to keep asking you this, but I need you to answer honestly."

"...Did something happen with Tomochika-kun?"

"Like I've told you over and over, no."

As proof of that, the conversation had suddenly turned in this direction.

"I was just wondering, since you both cancelled on the same day and all."

"We thought maybe you'd, you know, eloped... No, we didn't, but people were wondering whether you'd gotten a head start on us."

"That's gossip. Literally just gossip... Don't pull me into stupid stuff like that."

As with Haruki, Setsuna hadn't seen Tomochika since the night of her birthday.

As a result, not a single answer, from a single person, had come forth concerning that night.

...Except within Setsuna's heart.

"Well, right, but you two got super close. I legit thought you might get together."

"Also, we haven't seen him since third year started..."

"Yeah, I thought something might have happened... Like, did you get in a fight?"

"A fight? No, why would we?"

She would never fight someone she couldn't seriously clash against.

That was what she meant.

"Can we quit talking about this, please?"

"Well, the fact remains that you left us hanging."

"Yeah, though we managed to scrape by thanks to the late Mr. Class Rep..."

"God, I don't even wanna think about what would have happened without Kitahara-kun..."

"I'm not going to skip out this time, okay!? Please stop talking about this! Drop it! I'm done!"

The seminar trip, in which neither Setsuna nor Tomochika had participated, had apparently taken a bit of a strange turn.

The two unexpected cancellations left the remaining organizers in a fix, lacking the full information concerning those attending, when suddenly, a savior appeared to stand in for them.

...That is to say, Kitahara Haruki himself, the person who had withdrawn from the seminar because he was transferring in spring.

Making full use of his inherent coordinating abilities, diligence, and the forwardness that allowed him not to shy away from professors nor from upperclassmen, he recompiled the list of attendants entirely.

And he didn't stop there—he went along on the trip itself, keeping an eye not only on what was supposed to be Setsuna's and Tomochika's job, but on the other organizers' task assignments as well, mercilessly speaking up and stepping in wherever thoroughness was lacking, and ultimately came to manage the entire body of organizers.

While he never made himself stick out, he pulled all the strings from behind the scenes; he handled many tasks such as room assignments at the boarding house, travel to and from the ski resort, running the parties, buying supplies, and so on.

And, last of all, he returned to Tokyo early, accompanying an upperclassman who had been injured while skiing.

When Setsuna learned of this slightly bewildering legend from the organizers after the fact, she was seized with the impulse to get angry, to ask, "Why didn't you tell me!?" But it occurred to her that she had no right to talk that way, as someone who had supposedly been stricken down with the flu, and remained silent.

And, after a little while, she realized that she had been wrong to feel excited over this intervention of unclear motivation, and started to see it as a defect of Haruki's, rather than a virtue.

At that moment, Setsuna found yet another thing to hate about Haruki.

She hated how obnoxiously meddlesome he was and how it threatened to make her feel guilty.

It was almost mid-April.

The lectures, which had been tied up in personal introductions and overviews at the start, were beginning to get into their actual material.

"I guess... he's not here."

Setsuna stood near the entrance of Cafeteria 2 in the northern part of campus, seemingly waiting for someone.

She loitered there alone, hugging her shoulders and shivering just slightly. The weather had gotten a good bit warmer, but it was still chilly in the evenings after the fourth period was over.

Her eyes were on the front door of Building 3, which was right next to the cafeteria.

Students were trickling out and melting back into the campus, their lectures and seminars over.

Incidentally, Cafeteria 2 and Building 3 were situated almost exactly opposite to Building 6, the Public Policy Department's building, on the south side of campus.

The grounds of Houjou University were long from north to south, and it took more than ten minutes to walk between the two places.

And the reason that Setsuna, who was generally a homebody, would take the trouble to walk such a long distance...

"What's going on, Haruki-kun...?"

Was, of course, because this was the Literature Department's territory.

The day before, she had received some interesting information over the phone from Io.

Although Haruki had transferred to the Literature Department for his third year, his attendance rate has been poor so far this term.

The source of this information was a "friend" of Takeya's in the Literature Department, who had only seen Haruki in Building 3 three times in the past two weeks.

This might be normal for an average humanities student, but for Haruki, who had a reputation as the "credit king" in Public Policy, such an attendance rate sounded like a complete disaster.

...Also, as background for the fact that Io was still passing on gossip about Haruki to Setsuna, there obviously was a small discrepancy in information...

In other words, Setsuna hadn't even told her best friends that she had broken up with Haruki.

She had been so thorough in hiding it that whether she actually had the desire to break up was questionable.

"...Haah..."

As she reflected upon the state of affairs up to this point, she sighed at how embarrassing she was, as she had proven over and over and over.

What did she expect to accomplish by waiting for Haruki like this?

Even if he were at school today, it didn't mean she would be able to go up and talk to him.

She would just release the breath she was holding in, feeling indignant over being made to worry.

And if he *weren't* at school today, that didn't mean she would be able to call him and check on him.

She would only become more anxious and curious.

She was forced to acknowledge that she was acting like a stalker, and what she was doing was extraordinarily nonsensical and pitiful.

But from Setsuna's point of view, even that was Haruki's fault.

He wasn't attending university despite how quick he was to scold others for skipping lectures...

He'd said he was transferring because of his plans for his future career, but his actions didn't line up with what he said.

Anyone who told her *not* to worry over something like this would have something wrong with their head.

She hated him a little bit for making her choose to walk all this way.

She hated him a little bit for making her do something so embarrassing.

She hated him a little bit for the selfish conduct that made her worry this much.

And these three "little" hatreds combined to form one more complete thing she hated about him.

"Ah...!"

She made a strenuous effort to soften her expression, which had turned grim on its own...

But she also couldn't miss that familiar jacket leaving Building 3.

"...Eh?"

Nor could she miss the girl leaving Building 3, right next to that familiar jacket, clinging to its arm.

"C'mon, Haruki, you came all the way to school today, you gotta have a drink with me!"

"After last week's hangover? No thanks. Let go of me."

"Is that really how you want to talk to someone when they're giving you a generous invitation?"

"I'm pretty sure I've been the one treating you every time."

"W-Well, uh, things have been a little tight for me this month..."

"What a coincidence, it's the same for me. Which means I'm busy with work this month. Bye."

"Aah! You're completely heartless! What, am I just supposed to abstain!?"

"Well, it couldn't hurt your health. Let go, I don't want you stretching my sleeve!"

"....."

She couldn't approach and couldn't run away, either.

All she could do was wait as Haruki and the girl clinging to his arm passed in front of her.

They passed by without noticing her watching from her hiding place, and she trembled from a rather unreasonable emotion—she felt humiliated at the fact that she wasn't noticed.

She couldn't see the girl's face, and she didn't want to.

She only understood from the girl's tone and attitude that she was completely different from her.

She was assertive enough to talk to him without any reservation. She was carefree and bright.

And above all, there was the fact that she was someone whom he accepted.

...They were all traits that she once possessed in the past, though she no longer had them now.

At that moment, Setsuna found yet another thing she hated about Haruki.

She detested how he had treated her so poorly despite the fact that he made her worry so much about him.

"Have you... lost some weight?"

Setsuna remained where she was for a while, staring openly now that they had moved far enough away from her, and feeling a new worry sprouting.

"All right, I'll go next... Here's to the coming year. Cheers!"

"Ah, yes... I hope everything goes well... *glug...*"

"Woow, nice, nice. You can really drink, Ogiso-chan!"

"Guys, don't make her drink that much. She usually only has one sip."

"I dunno, from what I'm seeing, she's used to this."

"Maybe she's just hiding it usually?"

"Oh, no, I... Thank you."

"S-Setsuna...?"

"That's the way! All right, my turn next..."

The weekend welcome party was moving too fast for Setsuna.

Her usual moderate, reserved behavior was taking a backseat, and she drank everything that was poured, answered everything that was asked, but didn't smile back at any of the trivial talk.

To her friends in the same year, who always tried to drag her to parties and were consistently disappointed in their attempts, this was a somewhat bewildering sight.

And none of them could have imagined the origin—her former classmate, the male student who had changed departments just recently—or the reason, a jealous feeling that was far too petty for the idol of the university...

"That's a cute blouse. Did that design just come out this year?"

"Ah, um... I just bought it somewhere."

If diligently searching through bargain sales and specials online, carefully selecting the item that looked the best for its price and ordering it could be called "just buying it somewhere," then Setsuna's wording was correct.

Except for that single half-year in high school when she got more relaxed, Setsuna had always been a vain girl.

Though she herself didn't know to whom she was trying to show off to, or what she was so stubborn about.

"I assume you're looking for a guy on the same level as you?"

"You want a guy who spends good money on his clothes?"

"Guys, I just told you you're not allowed to ask Setsuna questions like that..."

"Well... I guess I'm not worried about how much money is spent, but I do prefer a guy who puts effort into his personal appearance."

"Se...tsuna?"

"Aha, got it. Yeah, that makes sense..."

"I mean, if you're gonna walk next to Miss Houjou, that's like the most basic requirement."

It was a fairly inoffensive answer...

But for all the guys present, this first-ever allusion to *the* Ogiso Setsuna's tastes was quite an event.

"Hey, Ogiso-chan, mind giving me your evaluation? Would the clothes I'm wearing right now suit you? They're actually imported directly from Italy..."

"No, you just missed the whole point. It's not about the money."

"You gotta raise your level as a person, first. Your personality wouldn't fit her at all."

As the guys around her ran every which way with her remarks, Setsuna herself...

Exactly. Put some effort in.

You were wearing the same jacket as last year while you walked around with that girl.

If you've changed girlfriends, you should change your clothes, too...!

Wrongfully, she was thinking of a guy who wasn't even here—one who, for that matter, was far different from the kind of guy she had just mentioned.

He was always wearing the same clothes, the same haircut he'd had since high school, he was unrefined in fashion. His only saving grace was in his cleanliness.

And, although she couldn't make an unbiased judgement herself, most people would say his looks were only average...

If the group present here were to appraise him, it was likely that they would label him as someone who was simply unfit to walk beside Ogiso Setsuna.

And yet, the life of the girl known as Miss Houjou had been revolving around this guy for the past two years.

Despite having spent so much money and effort on herself, he didn't respond to it whatsoever.

At that moment, Setsuna found yet another thing she hated about Haruki.

She hated that he didn't notice or care about her appearance.

After that, the welcome party continued to build in excitement, centered around the grad students surrounding Setsuna...

But after two hours had passed, the students were tired after having had their fill of excitement and began to disperse, and a calm mood began to set in.

Accordingly, the topics of conversation shifted to what they'd been up to recently, places they'd gone...

"Oh, yeah, I saw Tomochika the other day."

"Huh, where?"

"At my apartment complex. He was working on moving someone into the place next door to me."

"Now you mention it, he hasn't shown up to any seminars. You think he's gonna drop out?"

"I asked, but he didn't really give me a clear answer..."

"I hope he doesn't. I need his notes..."

"You're not really his friend if that's all you're worrying about..."

"Well, if we don't have Kitahara anymore, Tomochika is our last hope."

"Oh, yeah, I saw Kitahara with him, too."

"Again? That means they're working at, what, *three* of the same places now?"

"I know people joke about them dating, but I guess they're still close after Kitahara's transfer anyway."

"I guess smart people just have some kind of connection...?"

"What? Why..."

"....."

"....."

"Um... Ogiso?"

"Oh... Don't mind me. Go on."

"But you look pretty upset..."

"All the upperclassmen are glaring at us..."

At the end of the table, as two guys engaged in smaller, more relaxed gossip, Setsuna, who should have been at the center of attention, suddenly wedged herself in.

...Right as one of them said "I saw Kitahara with him, too."

"Ah, come on, I shouldn't get ticked off by this!"

As Setsuna pushed off the street with her heel hard, she heard an unexpectedly loud, unpleasant cracking sound, shortening the lifespan of both Setsuna and the heel by a bit.

She took the fifteen-minute walk from Suetsugu Station to her house quickly, sometimes cursing like that, sometimes falling into depression, sometimes getting agitated.

The time was 9:40.

When the main party ended at nine, she betrayed the hopes of the guys who were expecting her to go to the after party, saying it was almost her curfew; she then brushed them off when they offered to see her home, and vanished in the direction of the ticket gate.

The development brought some peace of mind to her fellow female students in a way, knowing that such a decision was characteristic of Setsuna given their impression of her; however, it was a disaster to the male grad students who didn't know about her decision to restrain herself. They could easily imagine the party going flat without her there.

Setsuna didn't care about that, however...

I did it for Tomochika-kun.

Not for myself...

When Haruki came up at the party, Setsuna got excited for a moment.

But as she listened to the details, she grew more and more irritated.

If Haruki was still working at the same places post-transfer as Tomochika, that meant they were still involved with each other.

He never contacted her. He never looked at her, even when she was close by.

He didn't apologize, refute, explain, or rebuke her for what had happened.

But he hadn't cut things off with Tomochika, who had given her that unforeseen confession and caused her so much pain.

To Setsuna, this was unforgivable.

Because everything was clear now.

She realized who he had been trying to protect when he decided to share accomodation with someone during the spring break seminar trip... and the fact that he had intervened for the sake of maintaining their friendship.

You're still so nice to everyone, Haruki-kun.

But you're never nice to me. You're so cruel...

You still lecture even the girls, Haruki-kun.

But you never do that to me. You're so cruel...

You're still nosy and meddlesome when it comes to your friends, Haruki-kun.

But you never spare a thought for me. You're so cruel...

At that moment, Setsuna found two more things to hate about Haruki.

She hated him for gradually blending into a completely different world with his new girlfriend and Tomochika.

She hated him for disappearing from the world that she had never been able to escape herself.

"He's just... so annoying!"

Her head was gradually filling up with Haruki.

With every "hatred" she added, her feelings for him intensified beyond how they were before.

"...Ah."

Setsuna had been doing this the wrong way from the start.

She should have been collecting *indifference*, not hatred.

...But right now, standing in the street in a daze with one broken shoe, there was no way for her to understand such an obvious fact.

It was now May.

A fine afternoon on the last day of Golden Week.

"Hey, Nee-chan, I don't know whether I should be the one to say this..."

"Then don't say it."

"I don't see how it can be any fun for you to shut yourself in for Golden Week, like you did for spring break."

"I just told you not to say it..."

Setsuna had spent the consecutive holidays just as her brother said.

Yet again, doing nothing from dawn till dusk, avoiding seeing anyone...

"School starts again tomorrow... I don't really wanna go."

"...Senioritis?"

But she could only escape reality for one more day.

After today was over, she would return to a life that was full of people, but also without Haruki.

Even though he had almost never spoken to her when they were in the same department...

Even though she had dragged this loneliness around with her for two years...

Even though they had broken up in spring...

Even though there was no need for her to be assailed by feelings of emptiness...

Setsuna awaited the next day in idleness, with new wounds forming.

...Just as she was on the brink of sinking even deeper, the doorbell rang out shrilly.

"Someone's at the door, Nee-chan."

"I'm not dressed."

"I'm in my pajamas too!"

"If I go outside looking like this, everyone in the neighborhood is going to talk. Do you really want that?"

"Then wear proper clothes when you're at home..."

The neighbors did see the daughter of the Ogiso household as a proper young lady, in both appearance and personality.

But her brother, who actually saw her loafing around the house like this almost every day, couldn't possibly agree with that appraisal.

"They just rang again!"

"I know, I heard it! Fine, fine, just give me a moment..."

With a groan, Takahiro finally answered the call, shuffling down the hallway in his pajamas.

There was an interphone monitor in the living room, but the Ogiso family was fundamentally laid-back enough that no one made use of it as a security device.

A moment later, she heard the door open, then she heard Takahiro talking with someone, and another moment later, the sound of footsteps returned to the hallway...

"It's for you, Nee-chan."

"...Who is it?"

She no longer had the optimism to hope for Haruki unconditionally.

Thirty minutes later...

Two people sat facing each other at a window seat in a café that was a fifteen-minute walk away.

"It's been a little while, huh."

"...Has it?"

Of course it had. They hadn't seen each other in three months.

"I'm sorry I haven't been in touch after all that. I've had a bit... Well, I've had a lot going on, actually."

"Uh-huh."

She, too, had "had a lot going on."

"Have you... lost weight?"

"Oh... I don't know."

"I've lost eight kilograms, myself... I started working for a moving company, and it's pretty intense."

She hadn't noticed anything—whether he'd lost or gained weight, whether he'd gotten tan or pale.

...She couldn't even remember what face he had just been making.

And, really, she wasn't of any mind to look closely at him to check.

"So, what's this about... Tomochika-kun?"

Because the tiny bit of hope she'd had—even though it wasn't unconditional anymore—had been betrayed.

"We kind of left things off without resolving anything... It was bothering me."

"....."

Tomochika's smile was slightly embarrassed, apologetic, and awkward.

But, to Setsuna, that expression didn't mean anything else.

It was merely a sheepish expression from a guy she knew.

"So, um... I'll make this quick..."

"Um..."

"Hm?"

"Sorry, but I have to get back home soon."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I said I'd make it quick, but it's been ten minutes already."

She had nothing but time.

Her only plans after this were to go home and eat dinner.

But she didn't want to be here any longer.

"Ogiso, I just... wanted to know your answer for..."

"....."

"....."

"....."

"...I see."

In response to the continuation of Tomochika's confession, likely spoken after mustering up a great deal of courage...

Setsuna gave nothing but complete disregard, even though she was the one who had hastened the conversation.

"Sorry, Ogiso... for putting you in that position."

"....."

She blatantly averted her eyes...

She was not denying it in the least.

"I guess I'll get going, then."

"....."

And she kept silent, as a sign of confirmation.

"Oh, also..."

"....."

Setsuna had changed.

On her twentieth birthday, three months ago, she had made another subtle change.

"It's about Haruki..."

"....."

Her kindness, shown to everyone equally in form only, had disappeared.

She no longer smiled the way she had, only on the surface, at everyone.

"The other day, he and I..."

"....."

She had ceased to be the "good girl" who wanted happiness for everyone.

Her spite had grown a bit too strong to be called the Ogiso family's pride and joy.

"I guess you're not interested in that, either?"

"....."

The pheromones that drew people to her remained as they were.

But she had grown sharp thorns to pierce anyone who got too close.

"Did you... break up for real?"

"....."

She would eventually make enemies if this continued.

Perhaps the girl who had been loved above all would become hated above all.

"...Actually, you probably don't want to talk about that, either. Forget I said anything."

"....."

Yes, just like the girl who had been Setsuna's best friend, for one fleeting moment...

"Okay, I'm leaving for real this time..."

"Wait."

"Eh?"

"What about Haruki-kun?"

"....."

Now, it was Tomochika's turn to fall silent.

"What about him?"

"...Pff..."

"W-What? What is it?"

And, now, he began to laugh in astonishment.

To laugh at this question, posed and timed in the most selfish way imaginable.

"You're cruel, Ogiso."

"...Eh?"

But he knew. No, he had known since they first spoke.

He had known about this awful behavior of Setsuna's, which was almost unconscious.

"Your personality suddenly changes when Haruki comes up. You genuinely don't care about what other guys think at all, huh."

"Eh? Eh?"

But it was completely beyond the scope of Setsuna's expectations that she would ever be accused of being cruel.

This word which she had used so many times to condemn Haruki was now being returned to her in an equally condemning manner, and all she could do was let that fact pierce through her.

"It's crazy how you're so popular anyway..."

"...What about Haruki-kun!?"

"...Right, right."

Setsuna had changed.

...But, apparently, her fundamental essence hadn't.

For better, or for worse.

There was a reason why Tomochika had stopped coming to school in April.

No, there was a reason that he hadn't come along on the seminar trip in February, too.

...Because the day of his sick mother's operation had been set.

And on short notice, she was to be hospitalized the day that they departed for the trip, and the operation was to take place the day after.

Time, money, resolve, the future... with so many problems weighing him down, he had no choice but to turn to Haruki, whom he had run into *that night*, causing such awkwardness for both of them.

Haruki came half an hour after he was called.

Calm, in control, preachy, just like always, he gave Tomochika a pep talk, as though that night had never happened, and then got to work.

First, he took care of the most immediate matter—preparations for hospitalization, gathering the needed funds, and following up with their lodging.

...In other words, when it came to the trip, it wasn't Setsuna that Haruki had saved.

That fact could not be changed—regardless of how urgent or pressing his circumstances at the time were, and how characteristic of him it was to have had to deal with them.

Haruki returned on the night of the operation, which was a success, finally bringing Tomochika some relief.

After hearing the news and being reassured himself, he started the procedures for hospitalizing the upperclassman who had fractured his leg.

Everything progressed well for Tomochika's mother, and in the middle of March, she was at last discharged.

In the meantime, Haruki had found space in his busy schedule to go and visit her a number of times.

With all of that, the day for which Tomochika had dearly wished—a complete recovery for his mother—was growing very near.

But they both knew that the real battle was only beginning.

Surgical fees, hospitalization fees, all the money that would be required for treatments, rehabilitation, medicine...

Insurance would cover some of it, but the amount left over was enormous, and with tuition cutting in, it wasn't possible for the Tomochika household to get by on part-time jobs.

So, naturally, Tomochika resolved to drop out of university and start working properly.

...But the one who most vehemently objected to that noble determination was none other than Haruki.

He lectured Tomochika for three days and three nights, telling him not to waste his talent, not to waste the year's worth of hard work that got him into university, that if he could weather this now, it would surely benefit him in the future.

Tomochika finally buckled beneath his persistence, and immediately began to act.

He looked into every scholarship that he could take simultaneously, building a foundation that would allow him to devote himself to his studies.

Then, in April, to handle the upcoming tuition payment deadline, he added the part-time job with the moving company to the two he was working already.

Of course, Haruki was right there with him, keeping an eye on him and encouraging him when he got discouraged, unaccustomed as he was to manual labor.

His look, attitude, and actions were fierce and relentless, causing Tomochika to feel immensely indebted to him...

And things went on like that for a month.

At last, yesterday, with Tomochika's and Haruki's salaries combined, they somehow reached the amount necessary for the tuition.

The night before, they had raised a toast in celebration.

"Without Haruki, I would have dropped out long ago."

"....."

"You never find anyone who'll plunge into other people's circumstances like that. Most people would never go this far, even if they were getting something in return."

"....."

"He's nuts, and he drives me up the wall, and the best friend I could've ever wished for."

"....."

Setsuna fell silent once again.

She desperately hid her wavering eyes.

"That's why I want him to..."

"...Congratulations."

"Ogiso?"

But, right now, she couldn't maintain her indifference.

"About your mother. Congratulations... I hope she recovers completely soon."

"A-Ah... Thanks. Well..."

"Yes, I'm really glad. And I mean that, okay?"

"Ogiso..."

"I'm sorry, Tomochika-kun. I got so hung up on little things, and hurt you."

"No, no. I was the one who didn't get the message. So..."

"I'm... going to leave now. I'm really sorry."

Her heart... was about to break.

She thought her heart had broken in February.

But that wasn't true.

She had just assumed it was, blaming everything on him.

But Haruki wasn't the one at fault. He wasn't the cruel one.

She realized that the truly wrong one, the truly cruel one, was the other member of that pair...

"Wait, Ogiso. There's still something I want to say..."

The reason for Setsuna's despair was disconnected from the essence of what Tomochika had said.

It wasn't that she was embarrassed for having hated Haruki without knowing the situation, now that she knew he had done it for his friend.

"Sorry... I can't."

After all, even though she had learned how strong and noble he really was...

She was jealous of Tomochika and his mother, and that terrible part of her nature had suddenly struck her.

"...You might regret it if you don't hear me out."

As she listened to Tomochika's story, Setsuna was biting her lips, feeling both happy and viciously bitter.

"There's... nothing for me to regret any more."

Haruki hadn't actually changed at all.

It was just that at that moment, he had prioritized Tomochika over her.

Even though she now knew the unavoidable circumstances that led to him doing so, her pride wouldn't allow her to forgive it all.

She was a truly cruel woman.

"I told you Haruki and I were drinking together last night..."

"Stop."

"We talked about how I'll be able to come back to school. He was as happy as if it had happened to him."

"Stop!"

"And... he broke off our friendship."

"That doesn't have anything to do with me... Eh?"

"Wait, hang on... What are you talking about, Haruki?"

"You don't have to pay me back. Feel free to use it all."

"No, I can't do that. You're my friend. I can't just take your money..."

"No, you have to. ...I'm about to do something terrible to you."

"Seriously, what the hell are you..."

"Let me punch you... Just once."

"...Haruki?"

"I'm really sorry to drag this up now, but I've been suppressing it for a long time.

I almost exploded so many times, but I held it back until your mom's operation was done.

I put it off again and again, until she'd been discharged, and until your tuition was paid off.

But... I don't have to hold back anymore, right? You'll be fine without me from now on.

So... we're done. And you can back the hell off, you son of a bitch!

You fell for Setsuna, didn't you?

You confessed to her right in front of me.

You tried to take her from me...!"

"But you've been avoiding her, haven't you?"

"So what!?"

"You can't tell me you weren't planning on breaking up with her!"

"You don't know the first damn thing about us... Don't talk like you know anything!"

"Haruki..."

"I, I... I betrayed Setsuna.

I know she'll never accept me again. She'll never forgive me.

But I can't... I can't let another guy go after her."

"Don't you think that's really cruel to her?"

"It is cruel. It's absolutely terrible! But that's just how I feel. I can't stand it!

Tomochika, you're a good guy. You're a great guy.

I think you're even more commendable as a person than my best friend.

You might even be able to make Setsuna happy.

But I don't want to see Setsuna happy with another guy...!

Feel free to tell me whenever you get into any trouble. I won't hesitate to help.

But we're no longer friends anymore... I won't forgive you again."

"He really did end up hitting me. Look, here's the bruise."

"....."

"I don't think he's hit anyone before, though. He probably hurt his fist more than me."

"....."

She tightly clenched her hands together and set them upon her lap.

"To be honest, I think the two of us looked pretty awkward back then."

She moved her fists between her thighs, and clenched them even more tightly.

"He was really, really serious, though. That's why I was equally shocked about what happened."

She wasn't suppressing her emotions; she was trying to hold in something that was more practical.

"I thought he was my best friend, but he showed me I was wrong."

Right now, there was a different part of Setsuna that needed suppressing.

"But I know this is all my fault. That's why we can't go back to the way things were before."

Something was threatening to spill out, and she had to hold it back.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about... He's really serious about you, Ogiso..."

"...I'm sorry."

"Eh...?"

She was throbbing.

"I know apologizing won't fix anything, but I'm sorry!"

As she basked in Haruki's extraordinary selfishness and possessiveness...

She was moments away from getting wet.

"...Will you look at me, please?"

"....."

The two of them, a guy and a girl, facing each other across a table by the window of a café.

And she had had her head deeply bowed for a while now.

It looked so much like trouble in paradise that the customers around them couldn't help but stare.

"Really, I *want* to say there's nothing for you to apologize for..."

"No, I'm the one who's in the wrong."

But Setsuna accepted the puzzled stares appraising her without a hint of shame.

"It's my fault Haruki-kun did that terrible thing to you."

"Ogiso..."

"I'm the one who made him do something so stupid."

It's because I let another guy make a move on me, when I'm supposed to be his.

Yes, I belong to him. He could never allow that.

Setsuna's stance was so incredibly arrogant, giving no sense of gratitude.

"So let me apologize."

"If it'll satisfy you to feel like you're responsible..."

She couldn't go on being apologized to. It just felt so ridiculous.

"...I'm sorry. I mean it."

Finally, Setsuna looked up.

With slightly upturned eyes, and a smile that was a little mischievous, but unbearably lovely...

It was the smile she had three years before—her impish and unbelievably adorable smile.

"Jeez..."

Faced with that smile, Tomochika found himself even more lost than he had been that night in February.

Because he realized he had still been underestimating the extent of Setsuna's appeal.

No, in all likelihood, no one who had met her since she started university knew about it.

No one could have possibly known that *the* Ogiso Setsuna was concealing such tremendous, devilish charm.

But that was a charm only seen when she was full of love for a certain someone...

It was something as rare as a desert mirage, something that would never reach him.

"I've really... been an idiot, huh?"

As her heel scraped lightly against the floor, a small "clunk" caused her to panic, hurriedly lifting her shoe to make sure the heel was okay.

She was wearing the same shoe she had broken the month before, which had just come back from being repaired.

The neighborhood shoe shop had fixed it up for a thousand yen, and the parts had been changed just slightly, but it still had the same feel, supporting Setsuna's body perfectly.

It was a ten-minute walk back to her house from the café where she had parted with Tomochika.

...Thirty minutes after that, Setsuna was still meandering around her neighborhood, taking her time and taking plenty of detours on her way home.

She walked leisurely, at times deriding herself, at times reflecting, but giggling all the while.

As they were about to part ways, Tomochika had told her, "I want to make up with Haruki if I can."

And Setsuna had smiled lightly, and said, "Break a leg," and turned her back on him.

...She had completely disregarded his possible desire for her to act as an intermediary.

I'm sorry.

I'm a cruel woman.

My personality is so messed up.

...And all because of Haruki-kun.

"...I can feel my own personality getting twisted the more I talk to you, Kitahara-kun."

She remembered her own words from three years ago—back when she was still calling him Kitahara-kun, and he was still calling her Ogiso—with some nostalgia.

Smiling wryly, pondering how cute her own irrational sulking had been.

See, it makes me happy that you two fell out.

It makes me happy that Haruki-kun went astray for my sake.

As Setsuna walked along, chuckling with such a charming look on her face, the darkness overflowing from the thoughts that crossed her mind would've sent shivers down the spine of anyone who didn't know her well.

Haruki-kun acted violently.

He did something he never should have done.

...He did it because of me.

He lost control because of me.

Perhaps Setsuna did have the resourcefulness of an idol.

After all, she could smile at anyone now.

She could respond with a perfectly superficial smile.

...Even if, in her heart, she didn't care about them in the least.

Even if she was only thinking about one single man who wasn't there.

I'm the only one who can drive him mad...

I'm the only one who can lead him astray.

Only Kazusa and I...

That means I've been chosen.

He thinks of me as someone special to him.

She was no longer "Setsuna-chan from the Ogiso family."

The real Setsuna, the little girl who was raised with love by her parents, was supposed to be honest and kind, a good girl who wanted happiness for everyone.

Maybe he doesn't love me. Maybe he hates me.

But he can't stay indifferent to me.

But Setsuna was able to draw a clean line there, deciding that she was allowed to be bad right now.

She had to protect herself, even if it meant hurting someone else.

As wrong as it was, this was the only thing she could do right now.

I'm being so egocentric, it's unbelievable...

I guess this makes me just like you, Kazusa...

She wanted everyone to be happy.

She wanted the people around her to be happy.

...She wanted the three of them to be happy.

Just kidding... Are you mad, Kazusa?

Still, I don't think I said anything wrong.

Neither of us cares about keeping up appearances, after all.

She wanted to be tied to the one she loved.

She wanted to be full of love.

It was the first thing she had ever prayed for...

Hey, Haruki-kun...

Setsuna kept walking, looking up at the sky.

At the starry sky, with a warm wind blowing, with no more snow to come.

She kept looking up, trying to keep more tears from spilling from her eyes.

You've been so cruel, always causing me so much pain.

But you can't stand by idly when someone else makes me suffer.

You're a coward who refused to accept me.

And yet, you treat me like I belong to you.

Just so you know, I'm very popular.

Plenty of guys approach me.

And yet, you're so stubborn and so unfaithful.

...You won't even look at me.

You've loved a girl other than me this whole time.

And yet, you won't let me go...

At that moment, Setsuna finally found what she hated the most about Haruki.

She hated that he managed to ruin all of her efforts of trying to hate him, and how she loved that.

That night, Setsuna rewarded herself for the first time in months.

She pushed her body to its utmost limits, biting down on the bed sheet to keep herself from screaming.

Crushing her nipple between the fingers of one hand, while working vigorously inside of herself with the other.

Her fluid spread across the sheet, her toes stretched heavenward.

Her legs stiffened, and her whole body spasmed hard, climaxing over and over and over...

Epilogue

A Voice Unreaching

It was May, the first day after the end of the consecutive holidays.

In other words, it was the following day.

"Oh, lo, Takeya-kun, good morning."

"....."

"....."

"...What?"

"Nothing. Just wondering if you've checked the clock."

"Since apparently you think now's the time to say 'Good morning'..."

"Ah,ahaha..."

...Specifically, it was 12:20.

"We only had morning classes today."

"Meaning it's time to go home."

"Ah, ahahaha..."

As proof of this, Setsuna had encountered the two of them in front of the school gate.

She bumped into them as she was going through the gate and when they were about to leave.

"What were you even doing last night? What time did you go to sleep?"

"I-I'm just a little groggy after the holidays. I turned into a complete night owl this past week!"

She couldn't exactly tell them...

That she had overslept from sheer exhaustion after masturbating so hard.

"Groggy? I dunno, Setsuna-chan, you're looking awfully refreshed."

"Hweh!? N-No way, you can tell...?"

"Oho...? Did something nice happen over the break?"

"Oh, the break! Um, yeah, I was just sleeping all the time! From dawn till dusk!"

"I really wish you wouldn't talk like that, Miss University Idol..."

"Yeah, it's fine for us, but if any of those other guys heard you, it'd be across the internet like wildfire."

"Ahaha, yeah, I guess. Ahahahaha..."

Despite the very suspicious way she'd acted the night before, Setsuna answered their perfectly ordinary question in an unusually jubilant manner, which suggested quite a lot had happened.

But Setsuna was getting so spontaneously excited...

"...Well, anyway."

"Yeah, anyway..."

"...Careful."

Which meant that she had broken free of something.

It meant that she had taken a step forward, even if her stride was short.

"Why don't we all go get something to eat?"

"Sounds great! I haven't eaten anything today."

"Yeah, because you only just woke up."

To the two who had called themselves her best friends since three years ago, that much was easy enough to figure out.

"Let's get going, then. The morning breakfast set is over by now, but..."

"Hey, how about Yoneda Coffee? We can hang out there as long as we want."

"Just don't order anything with coarse anko in it..."

Now that everything was settled, Takeya with his usual long stride and Io with her quick gait took the lead, setting a high pace for their travel.

Setsuna, who kept to her own pace whether or not Haruki was there, strolled slowly behind them, thinking about the upcoming lunchtime.

She wondered how much she should omit when she would tell them about what happened with Tomochika last night.

She thought about how Haruki was still the same Haruki.

She thought about how despite that, he had acted in a way that she never could have imagined.

She thought about how she might indulge herself just a little in talking about him because of what happened.

She thought about how Haruki had declared that Takeya, not Tomochika, was his best friend.

She thought about how Takeya might react if she told him.

She thought about how enjoyable this lunch was likely to be.

She thought about how she hoped he wouldn't talk about his love life even more than she would...

Even if my love can't reach you...!

Unconsciously, a melody started to spill out of her throat.

But the moment it left her mouth, it dispersed.

In the end, it didn't reach anyone's ears, including Setsuna's herself...

"Did I just..."

The melody that played all through campus in the winter—a melody that had not once passed Setsuna's lips in the past two years.

She hadn't sung it.

She hadn't *wanted* to sing it.

And she probably couldn't have sung it, even if she wanted to.

But now... Now that she was immersed in this pleasant mood, it slipped out of her...

Hey, Haruki-kun.

Setsuna turned back toward the main gate, almost unintentionally.

More precisely, toward Building 3, which was a little way north of the gate.

Hey, Haruki-kun.

I still love singing.

I love...

Facing the one in her heart, who was likely to be there.

I really do want to sing again one day.

And I really want to be rewarded for it.

"Heeey, Setsuna-chan!"

"Quit spacing out! C'mon!"

"Oh, yeah, sorry! Be right there!"

Setsuna took off running—with a stride different from her hesitant pacing for the past two years.

That's why I'm not giving up. I won't give up...

My feelings will definitely reach him.

Even if our bond was broken once.

As long as he hasn't changed completely...

And as long as my feelings don't change...

Setsuna took off running.

Keeping her restless heart under control, moving forward, one solid step at a time.

But I still can't sing right now.

And I probably won't be rewarded for it right away, either.

But, one day, I want to set my feelings free with this song.

The next time I sing, it'll be with him there to hear it.

When... he wants me to.

But until then...

Until then...